若紫

ヒカルが地球にいたころ……③

Waka murasaki
When Hikaru was on the earth

野村美月
イラスト◉竹岡美穂

ファミ通文庫

「じゃあ、お兄ちゃんが、ヒカルの代わりに、
レーこのバージンをもらってくれるの……ね」

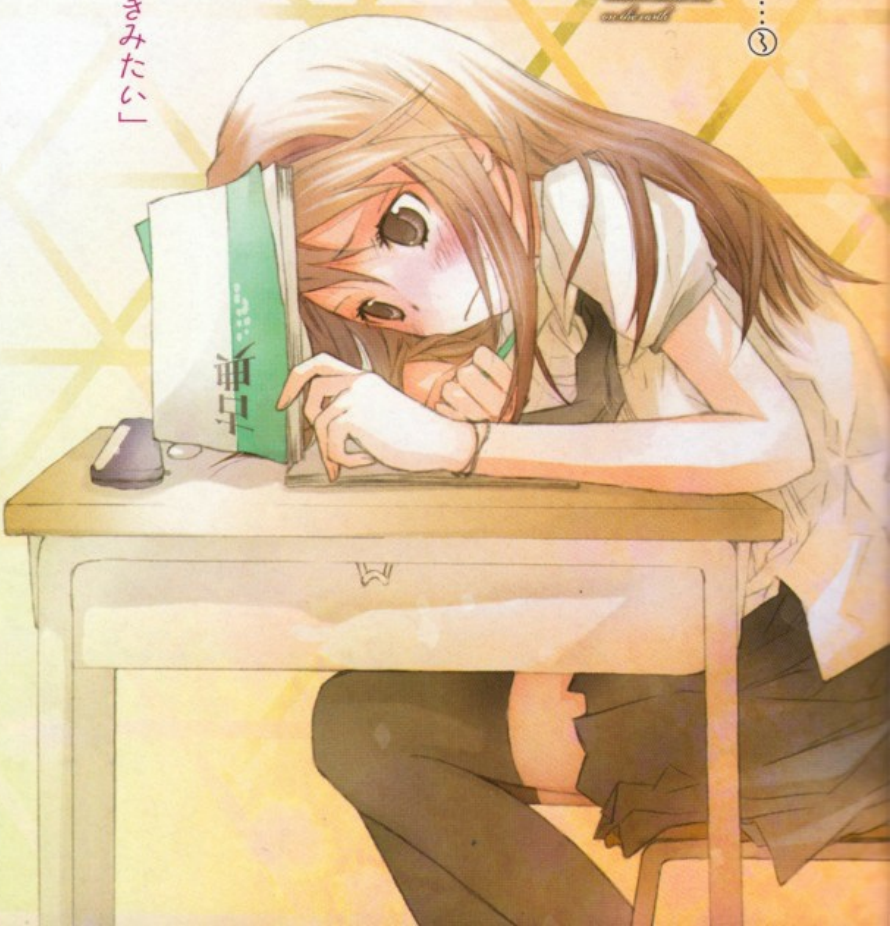
若紫

ヒカルが地球にいたころ……③

Waka murasaki

When Hikaru was on the earth

「あたし——あんたのことが、好きみたい」



「ロリコンだけは許せない！　最っ低ぇぇぇぇっ！」
式部帆夏
「今日から、あたしの犬になるのよ」
若木紫織子

「ぼくは、しーこを、泣きたいときに泣けない子にしたくなかった」
帝門ヒカル
「葵をおかしなことに巻き込まないで」
斎賀朝衣
「ヒカルは事故死だったはずなのに――
恋が……ヒカルを殺したんだって――」
左乙女葵

Chapter 1 - Big Brother - The Little Girl Called With Her Innocent Eyes Looking Up

Koremitsu frowned, curled his lips downwards, and showed a troubled look.

It was a certain afternoon in June, the intense sun brought the torrid air of summer. The Classics teacher was at the podium, carrying out the lesson.

Mixed amongst these sounds was a sweet-filled voice descending upon him.

"The blossoms of an Acacia tree resemble an angel's raiment. The long reddish stamens sway at the tips of the twigs, letting out a dreamy aroma. One will definitely feel entranced in Shangri-La upon sleeping within those soft flowers."

The youth with the wonderful angelic voice did not have a raiment, but he still gently floated above Koremitsu.

His slender limbs, his dazzling blond hair and his effeminate beautiful face revealed an unrealistic beauty and clearness. Despite being in a half-sleeved shirt and pants, the standard uniform attire, his beautiful face was beyond that of the other students.

In fact, Hikaru was an irregular existence, what they called a ghost, and nobody, other than Koremitsu, could see how he looked, or hear his voice. Because of this, he continued to ramble on alone,

"And speaking of Acacia, there is a Kino Iratsume, famous as a singer of love songs, who once sang this line – 'Bloom in the day, sleep at night longing for love... the silk flowers. Won't you come and enjoy them with me?'—Acacia flowers bloom in the day, and fall asleep unwillingly in the night. Is it really alright for only someone like me to marvel at this? I really want to marvel at this with you—well, that should be how it goes. If that intellectual big sister hears this gentle line, I probably will be told 'the

Acacia tree you talk about doesn't exist at all', just as what happened to Ōtomo no Yakamochi."

Hikaru spoke in a forlorn tone.

For him, a harem prince who could accept a girl's confession wholeheartedly, it would certainly be difficult for him to accept that someone would refuse a woman's request, even if it was a love affair rumor from a thousand years ago.

(But no matter how you're confessed to, there are times when you can't accept their feelings, right?)

Koremitsu listened to Hikaru's innocent words as he pouted harder, intensifying his frown.

He was not frowning because of the ghost floating in front of him, for he was used to hearing Hikaru chatter beside him, drifting around. At first, he really had difficulty accepting, but after more than a month, he was more or less used to it.

Rather than that—

With abated breath, Koremitsu glanced slightly to the left—

"!"

The girl seated beside him was as frozen as he was, looking over at him with a tense look.

(Woah!)

Once their eyes met, Koremitsu' head sizzled, and he hurriedly looked away.

Speaking of which, her face was flushed red just a while back, and she was so tense the textbook fell from her hands. She hurriedly tried to pick it up, only to knock into the chair and tumble over. It was really dangerous.

"Miss Shikibu, watch out!"

Hikaru's voice came from above.

Shikibu could not hear Hikaru, but as all the stares in the classroom were gathered on

her '…sorry', she whimpered and returned to her seat again. She then buried her head behind the textbook, preventing Koremitsu from seeing her face.

"…"

But Koremitsu could see her reddened nape through the white half-sleeved shirt, and his heart raced as if he was the one who tripped over. At that moment, he also recalled what happened before, and felt butterflies in his stomach.

"Miss Shikibu has been very careless recently. You have some responsibility for that as well, so it's better that you take care of her and prevent her from getting hurt. I think you can try lending a hand and support her."

Hikaru stated a feminist sounding line.

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— I think, I like you.

A few days ago, after the rain, Honoka Shikibu confessed to Koremitsu on the roof with a trembling voice.

At that time, Koremitsu was completely bewildered.

Is this person serious!? Is she controlled by some suspicious electric wave!? Koremitsu wondered.

Suffice to say, Koremitsu was highly abhorred by the presence of women and animals since young. It was the same in middle school, as the girls felt red hair was a sign of hooliganism, viewed him as a delinquent and isolated him. There was even a rumor that the girl seated next to Koremitsu slimmed down by 6 kilograms in a week due to excessive fear.

Even Honoka had mistaken Koremitsu for a molester, kicked him in the middle of the public, and showed him a look of extreme contempt.

After that, Koremitsu consulted Honoka over Aoi and Yū's matters, and Honoka finally realized that Koremitsu was an unexpectedly nice and straightforward person.

Because of this, they managed to improve their relationship.

But why would she suddenly blush and say ‘I think, I like you’ to a crude delinquent?

To Koremitsu, Honoka’s confession was overly abrupt, and he felt there was nothing other than a trap to it.

Their eyes met each other for a long time, and it felt time had stopped; after that, Honoka lowered her head, looking ready to cry, but immediately turned her head aside, raised her voice, and said,

—J-Just as a classmate, that’s all! D-D-D-Don’t be mistaken here.

She insisted as she spoke with an agitated voice,

—It’s just, a simple ‘like’ between classmates, that’s all!

Honoka said as she retreated stiffly, nearly tumbled at the door, and dashed down the stairs with a crying expression.

Throughout this, Koremitsu was unable to say anything.

Hikaru, standing beside him, had witnessed the entire event and put his head into his hands saying,

—I am sorry, Koremitsu. I should have taught you how to handle such a situation. Miss Shikibu's actions are 3 times quicker than I expected, so I was careless.

After that, Honoka had been hiding from Koremitsu.

Whenever Koremitsu tried to talk to her, she would turn away and pretend to be focused on typing a message. Once break time occurred, she would immediately run from her seat, either to spend some alone time at an empty place, or to find her friend, the braid-haired class representative.

This forced action however showed how concerned she was about Koremitsu. Even Koremitsu felt the awkwardness between them and he froze all over, sweating.

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"At this point, you might want to go out with Miss Shikibu."

It was lunch break.

After Honoka covered her face shyly, she bit her lower lip, and hurriedly left the noisy classroom, Koremitsu strolled down the corridor with a sullen look.

Hikaru naturally floated beside him, and then proposed something completely outrageous.

"I actually intended to get a girl who likes to smile as your girlfriend, but Miss Shikibu really is pretty, and has nice long legs. Maybe it is a wonderful thing that such an alluring beauty blushes as she looks at you. Those nice legs of hers are top notch amongst our year, whether in terms of appearance or power. There are definitely a lot of boys who yearn to be kicked and trampled by her."

"Tch, I don't have that sort of interest!"

Koremitsu grumbled bitterly with a frowning look.

Since Honoka had declared that she liked him only as a classmate, he felt that he should continue to treat her in the same manner.

Even if she had not said that 'like you as a classmate' line, and had confessed to him directly, Koremitsu would have been troubled.

No matter how pretty her legs were, Honoka Shikibu was a good person. Koremitsu however was hesitant on the aspect of liking her, on whether he wanted to date her.

It was merely a few days ago that he started his first love with Yū Kanai, only to break up with her.

His heart would flutter whenever he recalled her dreamy smile, her soft little hand grasped firmly in his, and the taste of rain as their lips touched.

She was a fantastic girl blooming in the night.

And in the morning, the illusion disappeared. The weak girl walked into the world of day through her own will, and though she had departed, Koremitsu kept longing for that love affair.

Either way, there was no way he could immediately divert his affections to Honoka, for he felt it would be disrespectful to both her and Yū. If it were Hikaru, he would definitely say with a beaming smile, "All the girls are like flowers, each flower has its unique charm, and are worthy of being loved". However, Koremitsu knew he was not suited to be a harem prince, and that a wretched peasant such as him could only be the waterboy.

Honoka had declared she 'liked' him as a classmate, so Koremitsu was trying his best to face her with the same attitude as before. However,

(I feel a lot awake now that I caught some air… or rather… my face is all red now…)

Koremitsu scratched his head, and Hikaru showed a hapless smile.

"Well, it certainly is like you to not like Miss Shikibu after your affair with Yū had just ended, Koremitsu. I think she will be able to understand this."

(Ugh… really?)

Leaving aside this, it would not be manly for him to remain aloof for Honoka's sake, and increase her burden heavily.

"Ahh, you are getting frustrated again, Koremitsu. It is not good for you to often frown when you are young. I told you that it is fine; Miss Shikibu will certainly want to talk with you normally. If you take a little initiative, perhaps things might become the same as it was before."

Just when Hikaru was speaking with a matured tone,

"Akagi, do you mind if I have a few words?"

An unexpected voice came sidelong,

And it was from the third year, Shungo Tōjō.

This nobleman had a masculine face, a long body, and was the focal point of attention no matter where he went.

Koremitsu had some interaction with this person because of Yū's case, but it was still a rare sight for him, classified as a noble in this school, to especially look for Koremitsu, the worst, vile wild dog of all.

The students on the corridor were looking at them with shocked expressions, and Koremitsu felt somewhat awkward.

“What is it? Is it about Yū?”

“No, I heard the cat she raised is left in your care, but I do not plan to talk about this now. Rather...”

(Who told him about that!?)

It was true the white cat that was with Yū was in Koremitsu's house. After he broke up with Yū, the cat snobbishly stayed at Koremitsu's house, as if saying 'I'll let you take care of me for the time being'.

But Koremitsu never mentioned this to anyone else. Besides, the people around him were trying to avoid him, so there was no one else he could talk to.

How did he know?

Upon thinking about this, Koremitsu felt a chill on his spine. At this moment, Tōjō turned around and spoke to him,

“Akagi, are you dating anyone at the moment?”

“What?”

Koremitsu saw that Tōjō's eyes looked exceptionally serious, and felt skeptical in the face of this sudden question as he answered,

“Not for now…”

Tōjō's frown intensified once he heard the answer. It seemed he had discovered something serious.

“Then, assuming that you feel a girl staring at you from behind, what will you do?”

“I'll tell her that if she has something to say, just say it to me, no?”

“What if that girl approaches you with a troubled look on her face?”

“Even if a woman challenges me, I won't do anything to her.”

“If she blushes and starts stripping in front of you, what will you do?”

“Call the ambulance of course! Either her head's all burned up with a fever, or she's a perverted streaker!”

Tōjō then grabbed Koremitsu's shoulders firmly, and spoke with confidence,

“It is truly a gift that you have such healthy thoughts. Please continue to live on like this.”

He then patted Koremitsu twice on the shoulder, and turned to leave.

“...what's with him?”

“That is truly unexpected. Mr Shungo looked so serious... I thought he was going to confess to you.”

Hikaru's words left Koremitsu unable to laugh,

“You idiot. What're you saying!?”

He glanced to the side—

“Upperclassman Tōjō just grabbed the delinquent king's shoulders and gave him a passionate look.”

A mutter could be heard from the side.

And then,

“Upperclassman Tōjō just confessed to the delinquent king!”

“Upperclassman Tōjō fell in passionate love with the delinquent king!”

The mumbling soon got louder.

(That's enough! Don't call me a homosexual delinquent king now!)

Koremitsu lifted his chin and glared at the students around him, scaring them. At this point, his eyes met that of Honoka's friend, the braid-haired girl who was standing in the corner.

She widened her eyes behind the glasses, and it was unknown if she saw what just happened, or she heard the rumors spread really quickly, as she said,

“M-Mr Akagi… are you gay with Upperclassman Tōjō?”

She was trembling timidly,

“I-I think… love is not divided by gender, as long as people love each other…”

And then, she showed a stiff smile,

“HO~NOO~!!!”

She then turned around and sprinted off.

“HEY! WAIT!”

Koremitsu furiously gave chase after the bespectacled class representative, who was running with her braids sway from side to side, like a pig's tail.

“HO~NOO~! HO~NOO~! HO~NOO~!”

“Michiru!”

Honoka just so happened to be at the class door, looking startled as she called out to her good friend.

Koremitsu's mind immediately boiled over.

(STOP! DON'T TELL SHIKIBU!!)

“What's wrong, Michiru!?”

“Mr Akagi has become gay with Upperclassman Tōjō on the corridor!”

“!”

(ARRGGGHHHH!!! THIS BESPECTACLED GIRL!! SHE LOOKS DECENT AND SHY, AND YET SHE'S SO DIRECT WHEN SAYING THIS!!!)

Honoka really seemed to be startled by her friend's words, and once she spotted a panting Koremitsu, she shuddered.

She stared at Koremitsu. Her face showed a complicated expression filled with shock, only to change into one that stated 'please let this be a joke'.

(Shikibu, please don't believe her! I…)

“Upperclassman Tōjō just embraced Mr Akagi tightly and confessed to him! And Mr Akagi stared back at Upperclassman Tōjō with a passionate stare! They must have done something together!”

(DO YOU HAVE A GRUDGE WITH ME, YOU BESPECTACLED GIRL!!!???)

Honoka again shuddered once again as she heard this, and turned to glare at Koremitsu. Her expression conflicted between anger and disappointment.

“Let's go, Michiru.”

Honoka turned her back on Koremitsu, and dragged the class representative into the classroom.

As Koremitsu was left speechless, Hikaru said with sympathy,

“Well… Miss Shikibu must have been shocked, especially since she just heard that the person she recently confessed to had embraced a male upperclassman. Well, do not be this listless now. Let us observe Miss Shikibu's situation, and find a chance to explain to her. Do not be down-hearted.”

Hikaru placed his hand gently on Koremitsu's shoulder, but as he was a ghost, his hand did not leave a mark.

“...I'm not down-hearted—at all.”

Koremitsu clenched his fists as he said.

“Haa, if I think about it, even if Shikibu thinks I'm gay with Tōjō, it's nothing after all. Haha… I guess it's a good thing if she ends up thinking that she shouldn't approach a damned guy like me, hahaha.”

“Koremitsu, you may be thinking of laughing, but your expression is really scary. Your face is quivering, and your eyes are narrowed. You do not have to force yourself to make Shikibu hate you there.”

“I-I'm not forcing anything!”

He stammered a reply, and did not say anything afterwards

And upon seeing Hikaru sigh with a look of sympathy, Koremitsu said unhappily,

“Besides, how can I go around caring about what others say about me? More importantly, we need to hurry and deal with the next 'regret' you have!”

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“Is it really good for you not to explain this to Miss Shikibu? She looked at you worryingly at times on the way home, and then shook her head a few times, and even nearly fell over.”

“Shut up! I said that I don't care about her now! Anyway, are you sure the place is correct?”

It was after school.

They arrived in front of a public elementary school in their task to complete Hikaru's unfinished wish.

The elementary school students were dismissed from school earlier than high school students, so there were only a few students walking out from the classroom.

There were a few children walking out with backpacks, and were terrified upon seeing a red-haired delinquent with a savage expression standing in front of them. Some shrieked and ran off in tears, while others winced as they retreated back to school. It would be troublesome if they looked for a teacher's assistance.

Hikaru seemed tentative as he answered vaguely,

"Yes… this is the place."

(Hm? Is it a female teacher this time? Some student's mom? Please don't start an indecent relationship now.)

During lunch break, Koremitsu sent a message at the school roof, in accordance to Hikaru's instructions.

"To dear cute Shiiko, the promised item is prepared."

Koremitsu was inadvertently impressed that Hikaru could remember the names of all the girls. According to Hikaru himself, it seemed his memory would increase tenfold as long as it had anything to do with girls.

This Shiiko was probably the name of the girl.

The reply he received was that he was to wait outside the school gate.

(But what's promised this time?)

And also, there was another mystery.

"Hey, is there any special meaning to this collar here?"

Koremitsu asked with veins bulging from his head.

There is a black dog collar on his neck, and he bought it at a pet shop as he made his way to this place.

Why a dog collar?

This, together with the eye-catching red hair, made him look like a delinquent king.

Hikaru suddenly smiled, and said,

"It is a mark, sort of."

That certainly was a random answer.

"But it really suits you, like a vocalist in a punk band."

"Isn't it weird to have a punk band vocalist stand at an elementary school gate? Ahh,

damn, I'm feeling that something's weird here. Besides, it's been more than 10 minutes past the agreed time. Did she run away in fear after seeing me?"

"Certainly not. She should be able to respond, since you are exactly what she wants."

"What?"

Koremitsu asked.

Hikaru's expression became milder, and he continued,

"Shiiko is a firm-willed child, so she must have been observing you."

(Firm-willed...child?)

If it were a teacher, would it be inappropriate to call her a 'child'? Even if she were a civil servant, she should be older than Hikaru, who was in 10th Grade…

At this point, a cute voice came from below.

"Big brother…"

Koremitsu lowered his head, and found a girl carrying a red school bag and a grassy green sling pochette looking up at him.

The large black eyes seemed to be filled with tears as he looked over.

(What now? Is she crying because of my appearance!?)

Koremitsu was least adept at dealing with animals, children and women.

But he could not leave this girl alone, crying. If he took out a handkerchief and wipe her tears away, would she be more terrified than ever?

Just when he was at a loss of what to do, the girl then spoke with a demure, cute voice,

"Big Brother...are you Hikaru's friend?"

"Ah? Yeah."

(Don't tell me this brat is…)

Cold sweat slowly rose on Koremitsu's forehead,

“Big brother… were you the one who sent me this message?”

“...yeah.”

Flabbergasted, Koremitsu stared at the girl again.

She had her silky straight black hair tied into two ponytails, and there were thick eyelashes around her large eyes.

She had glossy, milky skin, rosy cheeks, and pink lips. A delicate neck and legs with small hands holding to the straps.

Her round knees were exposed under the girlish, airy skirt, and she wore a pair of clean white socks.

She looks like a kid no matter how I see it! She's still a grade schooler!

She's at most 10! Maybe younger!

“Are you Shiiko?”

Koremitsu gulped.

The girl nodded, and sniffled,

“My name is Shioriko Wakagi. Sorry, big brother. I feel like crying now. I just thought about Hikaru, so…”

She said.

“Ah, erm, nice to meet you.”

The girl lowered her head in a loveable manner.

(Is she one of your unfinished wishes too!? She's still carrying a school bag! Hey!)

But Hikaru did not seem to hear Koremitsu,

“Ahh, Shiiko is really cute! No girl is more suited to wear white socks! The skirt length is also perfect! The knees have to show! The lips are glossy like peach! Ahh, the dangling black silky hair look so romantic. It is the best! Shiiko is really my little pixie!”

Hikaru had gone crazy.

(H...hey! I say, your face's melting from happiness! And besides, it's scary that you're staring at a kid with such a look!)

If Hikaru's admirers had seen him look so inebriated, they would certainly run away.

“Erm, big brother… why did you come looking for Shiiko?

“Ah, eh, well…”

“Of course it is to fulfill my promise with Shiiko, my little lady.”

Hikaru knelt down in front of Shioriko like a knight in the Middle Ages, beaming as he answered.

Upon seeing this, Koremitsu really had the urge to kick him.

“Did you have some promise with Hikaru? I'm here to help him fulfill it.”

Shioriko's thin shoulders shuddered.

“Promise?”

Her face immediately froze, and then, she blushed, fidgeted about and said,

“Well, if it's a promise… you're referring to that, right?”

Shioriko lowered her petite head shyly, and her black hair tied in twin ponytails swayed elegantly.

(Well, since it's a promise with a kid, I guess it's nothing big. Let's hurry up, finish this and go back home.)

If not…

“Shiiko really looks so cute~ in that pose! My heart is starting to race! Such a sinful little girl!”

He would be completely revolted by the friend creating a ruckus beside him.

(Besides, you don't have a heartbeat now!)

He turned to look at Shioriko, and she lifted her blushing face, holding his middle and index fingers on his left hand.

“Woah!”

Koremitsu was shocked, and Shioriko shyly lifted her eyes at him, saying,

“Then… big brother, you will take Shiiko's virginity in Hikaru's place, right?”

“!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

What did this brat say now!? This brat!?

Shiiko's virginity,

In Hikaru's stead—

(Hikaru----------!!!!!!)

Koremitsu gave Hikaru a demonic glare, and even as a ghost, Hikaru felt his life in jeopardy as he took a step back.

"Ko-Koremitsu? Your expression looks a little terrifying… Shiiko will be scared! Calm down!"

(How can I possibly calm down now, you idiot!!!)

"Th-There is a reason for this! And I do not intend for you to take away her virginity right now!"

(ARE YOU SAYING YOU'RE INTENDING TO ENJOY IT ON A SPECIAL DAY OR SOMETHING!?)

"Guu, Hikaru was a very kind person, and even offered to buy Shiiko's virginity when Shiiko's troubled over the lack of money."

(YOU BASTARD----------!!!!!!)

"Koremitsu! If you continue to show such a savage look, you'll have problems trying to find a job! Control yourself!"

(WHOSE FAULT DO YOU THINK IT IS ANYWAY! BUYING A KID'S VIRGINITY!? YOU PEDOPHILE OF A HAREM PRINCE! CRIMINAL!)

If his aura could chase a ghost away, Koremitsu would have hoped to chase Hikaru to the ends of the universe.

As he was pondering about this, Shioriko raised his fingers.

"Well, if it's big brother… Shiiko can accept it."

She lowered her head, blushing as she muttered, and upon hearing that, Koremitsu

nearly fainted in anger.

(AS IF THAT CAN WORK OUT! AM I GOING TO TAKE HIKARU'S PLACE AND BECOME A LOLICON WITH AN ILLICIT RELATIONSHIP WITH AN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL KID!?)

DON'T JOKE AROUND! I DON'T WANT TO BE SEEN AS A PERVERT'S FRIEND!

His mouth was ajar, and he was unable to say anything. During this time, Shioriko dragged him to the school.

“Eh… heh? Outsiders can't go in without permission, right? Let go of me.”

“Nobody's in school at this time.”

Shiiko seemed to have made up her mind as she lowered her head and continued in.

She was only holding onto Koremitsu's middle and index fingers, but the soft doll-like hand was grasping onto him firmly, and he was really unwilling to shake her off.

“Sorry, Koremitsu, but please accompany Shiiko for a while.”

Hikaru clapped his hands together as he said.

(AS IF! I'M NOT A LOLICON HERE----!!)

As Koremitsu grumbled in his heart, he arrived at the shower room located at the swimming pool, located away from the classrooms.

“Nobody else… will come here, so.”

There was the smell of bleach lingering in the entire room, and Shioriko leans her back on the door, lifting her head shyly as she said.

(IT'S CRAZY TO DO THIS IN A SHOWER ROOM!)

“A shower room really is a nice place. I have been to the shower rooms in middle schools, high schools and even girl schools, but it is my first time going to an elementary school shower room.”

(DON'T LOOK AROUND AS IF YOU'RE SO INTERESTED! YOU BIG PERVERT OF A GHOST!!)

“Eh? This isn't good, right? I don't want to come here and help Hikaru do that. No, Hikaru himself wouldn't want to do that.”

As Koremitsu was sweating over this, trying to convince her,

“You don't want Shiiko, big brother? Do you hate Shiiko?”

She showed a tender expression as she asked,

“No, it's not about whether I hate you or not. How old are you?”

“9 years old. In fourth grade.”

(THAT'S COMPLETELY OUT OF THE PARK NOW--!)

Koremitsu felt a chill up his spine.

But Shioriko clasped her hands around Koremitsu's waist, and cuddled him.

She pressed herself at Koremitsu's chest, and the body warmth reached him through the thin shirt. A milk and sugar-like sweetness entered his nostrils, and the exceptionally soft black hair rested upon his hand.

Also, Shioriko actually undid his belt, loosened the buckle, and even pulled the zip down.

(Wh-What's going on? Why is she able to do it this well! HHHHEEEYYYY!! STOP IT!)

Koremitsu wanted to push her aside forcefully.

But suddenly, he felt chilly on his lower body.

(Huh?)

He was taken aback when he realized his pants and underwear were taken down, and there was a flash a second later.

- Snap*

Upon hearing this, Koremitsu's eyes widened, and he found Shioriko holding a phone, smiling.

(Uh? What?)

He did not know what was going on at all.

It was already a scary sight that his lower body was photographed, but what startled Koremitsu more was that Shioriko, standing at the door with the bag on her back, her legs spread apart, had seemingly become a completely different person.

The young girl, who looked up at him shyly with a blush just a while ago, showed an indomitable glint in her eyes, her pink lips raised proudly.

Also, the mouth that had just said 'big brother' shyly, let out a vastly different tone,

“You pervert.”

She then continued,

“How long are you going to keep showing that ugly thing?”

What? What's with this tone now? Where's it coming from?

“You followed a grade school student into the shower with indecent intentions. That's filthier than a maggot.”

“Wh-What are you saying?”

Koremitsu pulled up his underwear and pants as he exclaimed. Shioriko showed the photo she just took to him.

There was a red-haired youth on the photo, with raised eyebrows, a wide nose bridge, and a savage expression with his arms raised, his lower body completely naked.

His posture was such that he resembled a predator hunting its prey, and also, the school emblem on the uniform and the signboard 'Nagomi Elementary School-Shower Room Usage Times' could be seen clearly.

Suffice to say, he looked like a vile beast of a high school student, ravenously entering an elementary school's shower room.

A stunned Koremitsu watched Shioriko run away from his front, and the latter leisurely reached for the door.

She then put the phone at her lips, narrowed her eyes coldly, and stated arrogantly,

“If you don't want this photo to appear in your school, from now on, you shall be my dog.”

◊◊◊

That night,

"Please, Koremitsu? I can only bequeath Shiiko to you, my trusted good friend.”

Hikaru was seated on the cushion, kneeling down, bowing earnestly as he begged. Koremitsu was seated in a cross-legged manner, his arms folded as he glared back.

Right beside Hikaru was the snowy white body of the kitten Lapis. It would occasionally stare at Koremitsu with its lapis-blue eyes, but soon quickly closed its eyes disinterestedly.

"Shiiko is a child who is like a blooming Purple Gromwell. At first glance, she may look like a petite white pitiful flower, but she has a noble, beautiful and arrogant personality befitting a Purple Gromwell. The locally produced Purple Gromwells in our country are an endangered species, so there is a need to protect and nurture Shiiko. If not, she may be trampled or weeded out at will, and may even wilt as a result. Shiiko is actually a good-natured child at heart, but children are quite reckless in their thinking, and do such things for the sake of money.”

“...looks like she's very used to this from the way she blackmailed me.”

Upon hearing Koremitsu laying on the floor say this, Hikaru responded with silence.

“...that brat's not a first time offender, I guess.”

"Th-that's because a lot of things happened to Shiiko… there is an issue with the adult who is raising her--ahh, I am not blaming you for being careless or anything however, Koremitsu. With a cute girl like Shiiko threatening me, I am even willing to give up on Christianity.”

“Don't say something that'll bring about protests from religious organizations!”

Koremitsu yelled.

Lapis opened her eyes in a silt.

Koremitsu however continued to glance aside at Hikaru, whose shoulders were lowered, and whose voice got gentler.

“Hey, how did you meet that brat in the first place?”

“I guess, we were at the park back then. Shiiko was beside the parterre, looking at the lilies, saying 'Big brother, there are pretty flowers here. I think there's a Thumbelina in there', She was as cute as an angel…”

“Stop lying. I remember very well that you bought that brat's virginity. You don't deny that, right?”

“Uu, but we really first met each other at the park.”

Hikaru seemed to ponder, and then said,

“Last Spring, I saw Shiiko at the roadside, selling her first night to a lolicon-looking fat uncle, so I bought her at a higher price. How much did she want? W-Woah!”

Koremitsu knew that his body would pass through, but he still swung a punch.

Hikaru tumbled back as he sat down, and Lapis retreated to a corner of the room, seemingly trying to avoid this calamity.

“Don't you run away! You damned lolicon!! You child sex offender bastard! Loli pervert prince!”

“But even if you tell me not to run away, my body will run away instinctively when I see someone looking like Yama chasing me around! And I just prepaid for Shiiko's first time; I haven't done anything yet! I plan to wait for another 4 years, so please cut me the lolicon tag for now!”

“Just 4 years!? A college student doing it with an eighth grader girl is a violation of children rights!!” Koremitsu continued to hunt and punch the escaping Hikaru, but his

fist could only pass through the latter's body, and not hit him.

“SHUT UP, KOREMITSU! GO OUTSIDE IF YOU WANT TO DO SPORTS!!”

His aunt Koharu growled angrily from the outside.

Koremitsu himself felt that he was simply wasting his strength for no good reason, and put his hands onto the floor weakly, panting hard.

“Good thing you can't live on for another 4 years, you bastard.”

“How depressing.”

“Since you have so much money, pay me back for what I paid for the theme park entrance tickets and for what I bought for Yū.”

Koremitsu reached his hand out.

“Eh, but I never had any friends, and I never had any interests, so I was happy that the pocket change and New Year money I saved up on were finally put to good use, so I said 'Don't worry, leave it to me'…”

“I don't know who else is rich enough to be the patron for an elementary school brat carrying a school bag. How much did you pay exactly?”

Hikaru showed a vague smile.

“It may be a little more than what you imagined. But it's worth giving up a billion if it's for Shiiko.”

Koremitsu again straightened his arm and swung it at Hikaru's face.

“Woah!” Hikaru shrieked.

“Please do not hit my face.”

“Shut up. Why're you complaining when you know it can't hurt you? You only gave her pocket change, and did nothing else to her, right?”

“Yes. Trust me.”

(It's because it's you that I don't believe you!!!)

Koremitsu thought as he glared furiously, but managed to abstain from saying this.

Besides, there was something else he had to be certain of.

“Didn't you ask me to wear that collar before I looked for the brat?”

“That is right. I felt that wild design really suit you, Koremitsu…”

“You say it's a marking, but you've been planning on letting me be her dog right from the beginning, right?”

Hikaru averted his glance slightly, but upon hearing the sound of Koremitsu rummaging through boxes and looking for weapons, he realized he was disadvantaged, and said,

“S-Shiiko said that she wanted to have a fierce-looking loyal dog, so I promised to get her one. You did fit her criteria very well, so I guessed she would definitely like it. As I expected, she really has taken a liking to you.”

“SO THAT'S WHAT YOU MEAN BY 'SUITS'!!!”

Koremitsu recalled the words Hikaru said at the school gate, and his blood boiled again.

“This damned happy-go-lucky prince! Alright, it's decided! I'm going to be a disciple of a priest and learn the art of exorcism!”

“I'm sorry!! Shiiko will be suspicious if you approach her normally, so the first thing is to gain her trust--this is the principle of winning confidence by inflicting self-injury.”

“What trust!? She's calling me her dog! Where's the trust!?”

“It certainly is true that it might be a humiliation for you, hailed as a Delinquent King, to let an elementary schoolgirl take such a photo of you and use it as blackmail to make you her dog, but this is for her sake, so please be her dog for the time being. You definitely can make a good dog! I guarantee that!”

“Don't call a human 'dog' here and there! And don't guarantee that!!”

You're noisy, Lapis seemed to show such an annoyed look.

“Anyway, even if you had promise that you'll give that brat a dog, I don't want to be the nanny for that damned brat.”

Koremitsu stated firmly, and Hikaru immediately lowered his shoulders dejectedly, saying with a forlorn look,

“Shiiko does not have any relative who would scold her.”

Koremitsu was taken aback by these words.

Hikaru continued to mutter,

“Shiiko had always lived with her grandfather, and they were financially poor ever since she was young. That is why she has such a pragmatic personality as a result, but she really is an innocent and gentle girl at heart. That is why I want to turn her into a fine lady. I want to mold her into an outstanding person when I was with her, just like you are, Koremitsu.”

Hikaru lowered his head, his eyes dulled having lost their luster, and his tone and voice were gloomy.

“But I disappeared when I was worried about her, and she intends to continue doing such dangerous things.”

Hikaru bit on his elegantly curved lips, and lifted his head, showing an anxious expression as he said to Koremitsu,

“If this keeps up, Shiiko might get cheated and abducted by the Yakuza and sold off as a result. That is why I hope you can tell Shiiko that a fine lady cannot cheat and threaten others in my stead! P-Please, Koremitsu!”

His eyes were fixated on Koremitsu as he begged earnestly.

(...this guy is still so serious when it comes to women affairs.)

Normally, he would float around leisurely, being nonchalant about everything else, just as a ghost would--but when push comes to shove, his expression would become

abnormally earnest and decisive.

Perhaps he was truly worried about that arrogant brat after all.

(Guess I have no choice. It's true that I don't know what she'll end up doing if I leave her alone like this, and I get a feeling that the bad guys will be after her.)

'Well, it can't be helped.

I did promise that I'll resolve all his 'regrets' regarding women.

He muttered as he started scratching at his hair.

(~~~~but I'm not good at dealing with brats.)

Koremitsu stared at Hikaru, whose knees were bent together on the cushion, his body leaning forward, showing a serious look; he frowned, and said,

“I'll be her dog for the time being, I guess.”

Chapter 2 - It's Time for Sparrow Hunting

The following day after school, Koremitsu received a call on the cellphone from Shioriko, who seemed to have waited for his dismissal time.

"Come over right now, dog."

After giving the instructions, she hung up.

"Did you really teach that brat any etiquette on being a lady? She's not showing any manners at all!"

"Of course I did treat her as a fine lady. Whenever we walk, I would stand at the roadside, and I put a handkerchief on where she sits whenever we sit on a bench. I carry her up the stairs, I bring her to the arts museum or the theater during the holiday. Also, Shiiko looks cute in whatever she wears; there was that one moment when I bought five dresses for her. Shiiko said that she never ate any Japanese Spiny Lobsters before, so I requested a chef to prepare a full course for her. I wanted to order some personalized stationery for her—but well, it was refused because many stationery shops could not finish the order in time."

"That's not educating her, that's pampering her. I think you were just irritating her, you bastard."

Koremitsu grumbled softly as he walked down the corridor, headed towards the shoe locker.

Over there, he found Honoka who left the classroom earlier standing alone in front of the shoe locker.

(Ugh.)

Just as Koremitsu was unable to voice out,

"Well… about Upperclassman Tōjō,"

Her voice was shrill as she looked around slightly, frowning as she said so. And then, she became fidgety,

"I-I-I-I-I don't really care at all either way."

She hurriedly said, but her face was completely flushed red, and her irises were rolling about.

"It's good after all!"

"Ah, Miss Shikibu!"

She did not respond to Hikaru's call to stop (naturally), and hurriedly stumbled off.

"Ah-Ah, she is going to fall down if she walks like that again. I have never seen her walk like that before."

"~~~~~Tch, let's go."

"Is it alright not to follow her?"

"She definitely ran off like that because she doesn't want to talk to me."

"I do not think that is the case however…"

Hikaru showed a worried look, and Koremitsu frowned his lips in a scowl as he quietly put on his shoes and walked out.

(Damn it. I don't know what to say to her even if I chase her now.)

He muttered quietly in his heart.

◊◊◊

"Seriously~, you're too slow, dog!"

Shioriko, carrying the school bag on her back, was at the meeting spot located at a bus station on a bustling street, stamping her little feet on the ground angrily.

Koremitsu glanced over, and saw that her black hair was bundled into twintails, a

light grass colored pochette slinging diagonally.

"Ahh, you don't have the collar on you! You have to have the collar on you. You are my dog after all."

She puffed her cheeks unhappily.

"Did you bring the collar along? Put it on! Right now!"

Who in the world wants to put on such a thing!? Koremitsu wanted to roar back, but he recalled that he decided, with an open heart to become her dog.

"Guh, is this good enough?"

And so he put on the dog collar obediently.

Shioriko's face reddened slightly as she looked up at Koremitsu and giggled,

"That's right. From now on, you have to keep putting the dog collar on."

Though she sounded snobbish, her smile was innocent befitting her age.

"Shiiko aaaaalways wanted to have a dog, so she must be really delighted now. The plan to gain her trust by acting as a dog is a success."

(Really?)

Instead of trust, it felt more like a master-slave relationship.

"Oi, I do have the collar on me now but my name is Koremitsu Akagi, not 'dog'."

Though he did say to Honoka "You can call me a wild dog if you want!" when he consulted her regarding Yū, it was really infuriating for him to be called 'dog, dog' all the time.

Besides, she was a brat who was less than half of his weight.

However, the brat lowered her stare condescendingly.

"Calling someone like you a dog is enough. Do you want me to call you a pervert? Or a loli-dog? Or something else?"

"Hikaru may be a perverted lolicon, but I'm not!"

Koremitsu said without hesitation.

"That's too much, Koremitsu."

Hikaru frowned and protested.

Shioriko however showed contempt at Koremitsu's words as she went down the street filled with people walking around.

"All the men in the world are like that, always thinking of lewd things."

"Your view of men is way too harsh for a 4th grader, no?"

"A suuuper pretty girl like me has been harassed by many disgusting men ever since young."

"Are you serious!?"

"When I'm walking on the roads, passers-by will often come over to me and say, 'little lady, let's go and play with gramps here, okay', or something like that. Some will take photos of me and upload them onto the internet, my gym uniform gets stolen at school, my recorder becomes wet for some reason, and there are a lot of lewd toys stuffed in my shoe lock for some reason. Ahh, seriously, thinking about them makes me have goosebumps now! I won't forgive them all, especially the pervert who stole my gym clothes! I had to eat curry for dinner for an entire week just to save enough money to buy a new set of gym clothes!"

Shioriko again stomped angrily as she continued to talk.

"That's why I never put my gym clothes at the gym locker after that. I brought everything home, and even have a buzzer and pepper spray with me at all times. Even though they are at a discounted price at a second-hand shop, these things are still very expensive. I had to eat Soy Pulp for an entire week for dinner just to pay for them!"

"I-Is that so… I never thought you had such a tough life."

Koremitsu was sweating beads as he heard this.

"The country should allocate some budgets for the Special Police to guard

cute children like Shiiko."

Hikaru advocated with a serious look.

Shioriko angrily turned around,

"Because of which, I know very well how to deal with perverts like you who like little girls."

"Who's interested in little girls here!? Don't lump me together with Hikaru."

Koremitsu rebuked, but Shioriko turned her head around and said,

"Let me say this first. Hikaru may really be a perverted lolicon, but don't you say anything bad about him in front of me. I'll get angry."

"Heh?"

Koremitsu's eyes widened.

Shioriko's pink lips pouted tightly, and showed an ambiguous expression, either because she was angry, or because she was flustered. And then, she immediately turned her head forward to prevent Koremitsu from seeing it, and took large strides forward.

(Did this brat just defend Hikaru!? That perverted loli… well, I didn't say it out exactly, but am I getting told off?)

Hikaru stood beside them, watching,

"Shiiko still remembers me after all."

He muttered to himself. And with an utterly blissful expression, he turned to Koremitsu.

"You see? You see? Koremitsu, you just heard what she said, right? Shiiko really is a kind child!"

He said enthusiastically.

(You're being noisy, you loli prince.)

Koremitsu showed his annoyance as he scratched his ear.

During that time, Shiiko left the bustling street and entered an alley with few people walking through.

The grassy green pochette hanging on her waist swung about as she walked.

"Hey, where're you going?"

Koremitsu asked, and Shioriko stopped in her tracks, giving a sharp look as she looked around.

"Just wait here. If you see me in danger, come help me.

"Huh? What do you mean?"

Shioriko gave the confused Koremitsu a look, her pink lips raised slightly. Her expression was filled with boldness one could not imagine from a nine-year-old.

"I'm hunting sparrows."

Hunting sparrows, as in watching birds or something similar? Would there be sparrows flying in this dark alley?

Before Koremitsu could ask Shioriko about the details, she ran off with her twintails swinging sideways.

"Koremitsu, chase after her! You must not let her hunt sparrows! Ahhh! She is doing it again!!! I deliberately forbade her from hunting sparrows already!!!"

It was rare of Hikaru to be distressed.

"She's just playing with sparrows. It's fine for an elementary school kid, no?"

"No, the sparrow here refers to..."

Kyaa! Suddenly, there was a voice coming from the front.

It was Shioriko's voice!

"Ahh~" Hikaru lamented as he lowered his head dejectedly.

Koremitsu hurried towards Shioriko, and found her squatting in a small alley filled with trash, with a middle-aged man dressed in a suit, looking flabbergasted.

"I'm sorry, uncle. I need to do something."

"No, it's fine. Can you stand up, young lady?"

"Ah, it hurts!"

"You fractured a bone? I'll call an ambulance!"

"No, it's not that serious. Can you please rub it however?"

"Eh!?"

"Please… I'll feel a little better."

Shioriko said hoarsely and anxiously, but the man's voice got shrill.

"I-Is that so...then?"

"Ah, uncle."

(Wait wait wait wait wait! What are you doing now!?)

Koremitsu frowned, and screamed,

"Stop it!"

The moment the middle-aged man put his hand on Shioriko's ankle, his shoulders jerked as he shuddered

Upon seeing Koremitsu, he turned pale.

"Ahhh."

"Big brother! This uncle just did something shameless to me!"

Shioriko, who claimed to have an injured ankle, dashed towards Koremitsu and leapt in him.

"Th-That's not it. I didn't do anything—that kid asked me to help her rub."

"That uncle even wanted to touch that part."

"I-I didn't!"

The man was so flustered it was pitiful. Hikaru, standing beside Koremitsu, could only put his hand on his forehead reluctantly, and just when Koremitsu was about to say something, Shioriko called out, wanting to stop him.

"You mustn't, big brother! Even if this uncle does something lewd to me, you can't beat him to near death like the last time or you'll be sent to the boys home again! You've been through it five times already, and got scouted by some organizations. You mustn't beat this uncle's bones and break his head apart~"

(Who was sent to the boys home five times!?)

Even when Koremitsu was called a delinquent or a homosexual at school, the rumors were never as exaggerated as they were at this point.

That middle-aged man was shrieking in fear, kneeling on the floor.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

"Please, big brother. Forgive this uncle. If he's willing to pay for treatment, you won't have to ruin your reputation. You won't have to do something vengeful like pulling out his fingernails, marking his stomach, or dumping him into a drum and throwing him into the sea."

Upon hearing these words, the middle-aged man immediately took out his wallet, drew a few notes, and handed them to Shioriko.

"Th-This is for you. Forgive me."

He shivered.

(So this is how it is.)

Koremitsu finally understood what was going on.

She pretended to be injured, lure a perverted middle-aged man in to touch her, and

then extort for medical fees once the savage looking big brother Koremitsu appeared —for an elementary school student, she really was such a liar.

"Thank you, uncle."

Shioriko showed an angelic smile and wanted to receive the notes. Koremitsu however grabbed her hand.

"What are you doing?"

Shioriko widened her eyes.

"Hey, this brat's completely unhurt. Keep the money and hurry off now."

"Wa-wait, big bro—what are you saying?"

"Go!"

"Eeekkk!!! I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

The middle-aged man staggered to his feet, and scurried off in an instant.

"Ahhhh! You let my sparrow escape, you stupid dog~~~~~~~~~~~~!"

She was screaming with a sobbing look on her face.

She waved Koremitsu's hand aside, lifted her head at Koremitsu as much as she could, and stood on her toes, yelling,

"Why must you do such a thing!? I barely managed to catch that sparrow!"

"For goodness sake! What kind of sparrow hunting is that!? You're basically talking about the uncles here! What you're doing is coercion! It's illegal! You'll be arrested by the police!"

"Koremitsu, continue lecturing her. Teach her that a lady is supposed to be protected by a Knight! Tell her that she just needs to maintain a noble smile and bring happiness to everyone around her. She mustn't let the plump middle-aged men see her thighs so easily!"

"There's no way the police will arrest me."

Shioriko retorted angrily, her cheeks puffing.

"If he admits that he wanted to pay for knocking into an elementary kid, it means that he'll be admitting that he's a perverted lolicon!"

"That's just an adult's way of apologizing! What if someone really attacks you!?"

"That's why I called you here, you stupid dog!"

"Shut up! I don't want to become an accomplice!"

"A mere dog wants to defy her master! Wait till I show the photo of you being a perverted lolicon!"

"Ah—damn it! You're despicable! Hand me the phone! I'm going to delete the photo!"

"Sorry, but I kept an extra copy at home."

"Ugh—you're full of devious thoughts, you damned brat."

"If you understand, obey me. You're just a stupid dog who can only help me hunt sparrows."

"What did you say!!?"

"W-Wait a moment, you two are getting too agitated."

Hikaru tried to pacify both sides.

However, Koremitsu and Shioriko would not budge as they glared at each other.

At this moment, Hikaru exclaimed,

"Ah! There's a grass snake on Shiiko's shoulder"

"Huh? Where's the snake!?"

Koremitsu's rage had yet to dissipate as he shouted.

"!"

Shioriko suddenly backed away.

She looked on her body and legs with a pale expression, and was yet unable to calm herself down as she continued to turn around, pat her hands, chest, shoulders and arms.

Koremitsu stared at her blankly for a while, and then muttered,

"There's a snake."

"—!"

Shioriko hurriedly retreated.

"On your right foot."

"!"

Shioriko stamped her right foot hard with a sobbing expression.

"So you're scared of snakes?"

Upon hearing this, Shioriko's face reddened as she stared at Koremitsu.

"Th-That's not true."

She retorted stiffly.

"When Shiiko was about five years old, she was sleeping at the veranda, and found a snake on her face when she woke up. Ever since then, she has been weak against long slithery things. When I treated her to broiled eel back then, it was the first time that she could not finish the food, and the way she was practically in tears really looked cute."

"I see. So you can't take eels too."

"~~~~~~~~~~!"

Shioriko glared at Koremitsu with much more ferocity, and said falteringly,

"Y-You heard that from Hikaru right? It-It's nothing. I can't eat something so pricey like eel, so it was a great help. I-I'm not too scared of s-snakes now."

She was practically acting tough.

Hikaru continued to observe Shiiko with a grin on his face.

Thanks to him, Koremitsu was able to calm down.

And Koremitsu stared at the stiff Shioriko, telling her off with a calm tone.

"I say, I know about your family background somewhat from what Hikaru has told me, and it's not like I don't understand what you're thinking by using your body to earn money. Lying is a no go however. How about delivering newspapers?"

Shioriko's body shuddered, and she lowered her head, saying,

"...I refuse."

"Eh?"

"The law states that anyone younger than a 7th grader can't be hired."

"I-I see."

"And also… delivering newspapers alone is not going to be enough. I want more money."

"I am opposed to that too! A pretty girl like Shiiko will be easily abducted if she has to deliver newspapers before dawn breaks. Ah, a fast food restaurant worker will not do either. The uniform may fit her, but there will be weird customers. If she works at a bookshop, it will be very physically demanding."

(~~~This damned overprotective prince!!)

Koremitsu inadvertently frowned as he thought.

Upon seeing this, Shioriko pouted her lips in protest.

"What about the acting industry? Your acting skills are decent, so you should be able to be a child actor, right?"

Koremitsu personally felt it was a good idea.

Hikaru had already certified that this girl was one of those few rare beautiful girls,

and she does have courage, so she should be able to deal with the entertainment world.

However, Shioriko showed a condescending look, seemingly not considering this proposal at all.

"A stupid dog is a stupid dog after all, huh? Are you only able to think at such a level? The earnings most child actors get are basically all drained by the managing companies. In fact, the money they get is merely a scrap of what I can do when I go sparrow hunting."

She kicked the ground, and then said,

"My mom was scouted by a large agency when she was 13, and was supposed to become an idol star, but bore the child of some nameless guy, and died when she bore me at 15 years old. Our family finances got worse after that, and as for me, I won't join the entertainment industry no matter how anyone tries to sweet talk me!"

Her eyes were glancing aside as she said this, her jaw lifted as her long twintails swung. She was full of vigor, and one could ostensibly see a tall grey mountain growing behind her.

Koremitsu, having heard of her harsh childhood, was rendered speechless; this nine-year-old girl then gave a wry smile, like a middle-aged man who had experienced the harsh realities of the world.

"Anyway, if I need to fully make use of my cuteness to lure these perverts and earn more money to survive, I'll have to catch those sparrows. You have to play your part as a good dog and obey your master's orders. If you become too much of a busybody, I'm going to send you to the boys home."

And then,

"That's it for today. Or else I'll be late for the evening discount services."

She trotted off brazenly with her backpack and her green pochette.

"Hey, Hikaru, this brat has no intention of changing her habits. I'd say, she's very stubborn even though she's in elementary school, no?"

"There's definitely a way! I can tell you all of Shiiko's weaknesses if you

want."

"Does she have any weaknesses other than snakes?"

"Shiiko's ears are very sensitive, and she finds it itchy when I just blow on it. Also, her drawing is atrocious; when she had to draw a sakura tree for her art assignment, it ended up looking like a pink black hole. When she is hungry, she will become limp, like her bones have melted away. Once, when I threw the carrot skin in the fridge away, she would act like a cat with its fur standing up, looking really angry saying that it was to be cooked, and never talked to me for 3 days. She likes Baumkuchen, and though she looks cute when peeling the cake layer by layer, it really is cloddish of her, very unlady-like, so I really hope she improves on this. Also, the reason why she has long hair is because she wants to cut it if there is a need for money, but she does not know that nobody in Japan buys real hair anymore. Being a huge fan of the character Jo in "Little Women", she probably will be distraught if she knew about this, so I never told her about this."

"That's enough."

Koremitsu turned away from his friend.

(It's no use at all.)

The alley is gradually filled with the sunset light, shining through the gap between the buildings.

This 'one regret' Hikaru had was not something to be dealt with easily.

However…

Koremitsu recalled the sight of Shioriko patting her shoulders with a sobbing look, glaring at him while pretending to be tough. Upon this, he muttered to himself,

"Well, I can only guide her through patience. You're right, she may be a little… cute, I guess."

◊◊◊

The next day, during break time.

Koremitsu was walking on the school corridor, reading a book 'How to raise a cat for first-timers'.

(—Unlike dogs, cats do not have the notion of servitude, and do not have the sense of duty to obey their masters' orders. For cats, the most important to them is—)

"Hey, Koremitsu."

Hikaru moved beside him hesitantly saying,

"I am delighted that you are seriously concerned about Shiiko, but why are you reading this 'How to raise a cat for first-timers' so enthusiastically?"

"Don't we have one at home?"

He frowned as he stared at a page intently, muttering back quietly.

"So you bought it for Lapis?"

"Yeah, but after I think about it, Lapis is smart and doesn't cause a fuss. Since I went to the bookstore to buy, I thought I have to make use of it. That brat is like a cat too."

"Shiiko certainly resembles a cat, but..."

Hikaru stuttered as he muttered softly, prattling on, it certainly is a refreshing idea to to educate a girl just like training a cat...well, I did train Shiiko into an extremely alluring lady, not to act like a cat...

"I see. When cats do something bad, I have to immediately scold them loudly. Even if I scold them afterwards, it'll be completely useless. In contrast, if I yell at it and others see me do so, it'll revert back to being quiet and graceful—"

As Koremitsu was muttering to himself.

"Mr Akagi."

A shy voice called out at him unexpectedly that interrupted his reverie.

He stopped and lifted his head.

In front of him was Aoi Saotome, her face reddened as she smiled at him.

Her long flowing black hair was elegantly draped on her petite body, her black eyes were gentle and clear, and her tender white skin was crystal clear, giving a dazzling glow from within.

"Yo."

Koremitsu's expression naturally softened.

Perhaps it was because he realized that Hikaru, standing beside beside him, was giving Aoi such an expression too.

Aoi was Hikaru's childhood friend, and also his fiancee. When Hikaru was alive, Aoi always stated that she hated Hikaru, for she was incensed by his womanizing antics; however, once Hikaru did manage to pass on his feelings to her, she started to show such a gentle feminine appearance.

She, a princess-like pretty girl, would show a mature smile whenever they met recently, and she looked more alluring as a result.

Upon seeing Aoi, Koremitsu felt relaxed.

"It's rare to see you on the First Years' corridor."

"Erm… I need to do some club work."

She fidgeted as she lowered her head.

"I see."

Koremitsu said, his face placid. Aoi then shyly lifted her face.

"Erm… Mr Akagi. Have you started raising a cat?"

She asked as she looked at the book in Koremitsu's hand.

"Ah, well… sort of."

Back then, Koremitsu tried to open her heart and get on her good side by saying that he liked cats, and saved four kittens from drowning in a river. That was a lie however.

"Ah—well, cats are really troublesome, and I don't know what this cat is thinking. I've been trying to do this and that, but it just ran off looking very aloof. The moment I think it's a little obedient, it immediately raises its tail and hisses at me."

Koremitsu was thinking about Shioriko, and not Lapis.

Aoi did not mention to Koremitsu that he once told her he was raising kittens.

"*Titter*, this is what makes them so cute. When you wonder where they disappear to, they suddenly appear right beside you, curled up."

She tilted her head, showing a ladylike sile.

"I do know a shop that specializes in selling kitten toys and daily necessities. There are also many things like mouse plushies, felt balls and other things."

"Heh~ such shops exist as well?"

"If you do not mind, do you want to check them out after school?"

Aoi stared at Koremitsu, seemingly interested in his reaction.

"Do you mind bringing me there?"

Once she saw that Koremitsu seemed extremely interested, Aoi immediately answered ‘Yes’.

Hikaru, standing beside Koremitsu was beaming brightly. He definitely must have been happy Aoi has become a lot more cheerful than before.

(This guy only has such an expression whenever he meets Aoi.)

Perhaps the gentle and sweet expression he showed was the reason why Koremitsu could forgive Hikaru's nonchalance of a young lord, seemingly not knowing the perils of the world.

Hikaru's pure feelings had slowly entranced Koremitsu's heart, causing the latter to show a more blissful expression that usual.

"Today after school then. Ah, you have club activities, right?"

"No, it is fine. The art club is on break today."

Aoi hurriedly answered, and then blushed as she said,

"Erm… I have something to talk to you about… Mr Akagi."

"What is it?"

"It is a little inconvenient to say so now… I will talk about it after school."

After leaving this cryptic line, she immediately went away.

"What does she want to talk to me about?"

"Who knows?"

Hikaru too looked nonplussed.

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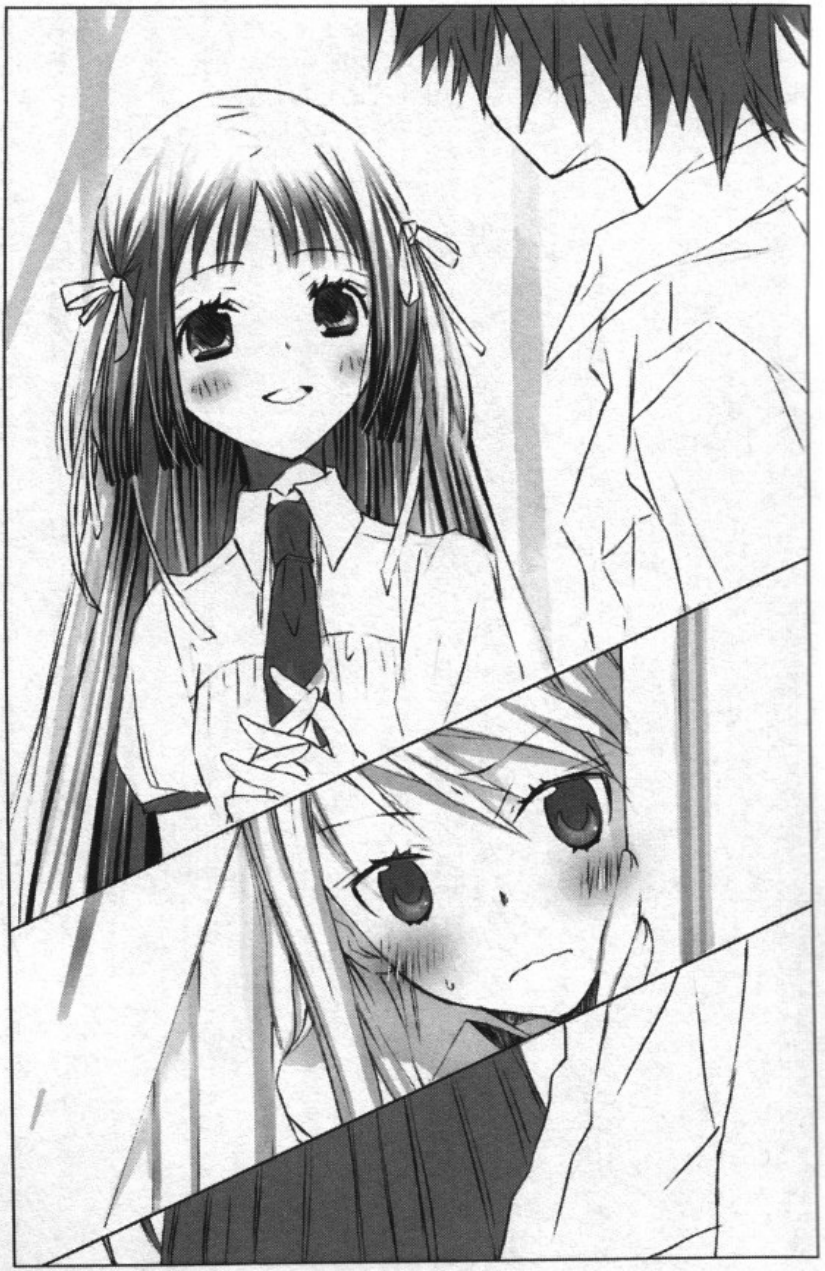
At the same time—

"Found them!"

Oumi Hiina was around a corner of the corridor, saying this as she held the cellphone in her hand.

"What exactly are they talking about here~? Mr Akagi's expression is so gentle. What is it all about then?~ Her Highness Aoi is saying those ambiguous words, being all shy here, you know~"

"Eh, you're kidding—didn't Her Highness Aoi dump Akagi before?"



Honoka Shikibu, standing at the same corner, gasped with a pale expression.

Earlier, in a moment of impulse, Honoka had expressed her feelings to Koremitsu, but for the past few days, she was being so overly conscious that she never spoke a single word to him.

She even hugged her pillow on her bed, muttering ‘What do I do?’, ‘Argh, I shouldn't have said it’, ‘Akagi's definitely depressed that Kanai just went to Australia. He definitely still misses her!’ while rolling on the bed.

However, he was being so amicable with Aoi a little while back.

"Isn't that an invitation to a date? Wow~ will there be a birth of a couple with such a vast difference in standings?"

"!"

Hiina's words caused Honoka's heart to skip a beat.

Birth of a couple!?

(But Akagi just broke up with Kanai… will he date someone else so quickly? Uu...but Akagi always liked Her Highness Aoi, and even pursued her so earnestly. Because he couldn't get her, he changed sights and focused on Kanai…)

That was not all.

Recently, there were rumors of Koremitsu with the upperclassman Tōjō staring at each other passionately on the corridor.

Michiru shouted ‘Mr Akagi has become gay with Upperclassman Tōjō on the corridor!’, she felt her legs quivering to the point of collapse.

Did he approach the upperclassman because he was overly shocked by the loss of Kanai?

Tōjō was a noble amongst the high school students, and there was a scandal of him being with Yū Kanai. He was intelligent, influential, and handsome; perhaps because they loved the same girl, they comforted each other over their loss, and developed that sort of relationship?

On the cellphone site managed by Honoka, there were numerous of such BL stories too!

—Did I just lose to a guy!!??

Honoka was dumbfounded, as if she took a hammer on the head.

No! That's impossible! There must be a misunderstanding here! With such a thought, Honoka waited for Koremitsu at the shoe locker, intending to ask him directly. But when she met him, her heart started to race again, and she had difficulty breathing.

(Never mind then!)

She then ran away.

Once she got home, she updated her blog, screaming "I was being too unnatural back then~~!", spinning around the swivel chair she sat on.

But even so, she believed that Koremitsu would never end up dating with another man —

(And he got so close with Her Highness Aoi!!!)

Heian Academy includes all levels of educational institute, from kindergarten to college, and those who were in the school since kindergarten were called nobles. Aoi's family was highly prestigious amongst them. Her beauty and grace befitted her identity, and she could be said to be the flower on the peak.

There was no way Honoka, who only entered during Middle School, could compare with her.

(Her Highness Aoi's so happy that she's blushing when she's with Akagi. She definitely doesn't have any ill feelings towards him at all. If Her Highness Aoi falls for Akagi, there's no hope for me at all~. In that case, I would rather accept Akagi being together with Upperclassman Tōjō.)

She did not hear the words that were said innocently as she leaned at the wall around the corner, pondering.

Truthfully, she still had yet to fully comprehend her feelings for Koremitsu.

She felt it should be more or less love. But a contradictory mindset like ‘how can I possibly like such a person?’ lingered somewhere in her mind

Recently, she would become so shy her face was practically on fire, her heart crammed with bittersweet feelings at times, sometimes frustrated to the point of wanting to punch a sandbag.

But when she saw Akagi converse with Aoi so cheerily, she felt her chest aching.

(That Akagi is an idiot! He's a delinquent scarier than a vengeful spirit, and he's now giving a girl such a gentle look!? That's a crime!!!)

◇◇◇

(I can't seem to feel happy. No, that's probably just me...)

After school,

Koremitsu cringed his shoulders awkwardly as he stood in the pet shop Aoi often visited.

The shop had a fantasy vibe to it, with pink and aquamarine wallpapers in it, and the pet cases resembling that of candy houses were laid in a line. There were pet utensils with cute pictures, animal-shaped carpets, and all sorts of other things.

Aoi, who had the image of a reclusive princess, walked on as her long black hair swayed slightly, and the pleated skirt of her uniform swayed elegantly, her eyes sparkling as she walked on.

“Wah~ This kitty potty is so cute! Come and look, Mr Akagi! Once you use this cooling seat, it will feel a lot more comfy in the summer. Ah, my Shell Blue likes this extendable tunnel too. It likes to sneak in and out of it, but since it is a little pudgy, it sometimes gets stuck inside, but it still seems like it enjoys it. When it gets stuck in the tunnel, it will lie on the carpet and wait for me to pull it out; once I tell it to wait, it will hiss at me to protest.”

Aoi picked up one item after another, her face beaming as she spoke to Koremitsu.

If Koremitsu was simply a carefree high school boy, the sight of him together with Aoi would probably make them a couple who loves cat. His red hair, raised eyebrows, stiff expression, sharp glare, and grunts however made him practically a delinquent.

The shop attendants and customers were giving them mystified looks, apparently unable to comprehend how the two of them were able to get together.

Back when they went to the theme park, Koremitsu was trying his best not to particularly mind them, for he was working his hardest in delivering the presents in Hikaru's stead; Actually, he already knew Aoi and him were incompatible.

Are you an idiot!? You'll definitely get dumped! It was no wonder Honoka had said that.

(Well, never mind. Aoi looks like she's enjoying herself, and since Hikaru is happy too, I guess it doesn't matter.)

Aoi was beaming, and Hikaru had a sweet smile on his face.

Hikaru's expression towards Aoi was sweet and tender.

His lips were brimming with love.

His bliss seemingly transformed into particles of light, floating, dazzling around him. Even Koremitsu felt happiness upon seeing this.

(I really hope you can continue to maintain such an expression, Hikaru.)

(I hope you and Aoi can continue to smile like this.)

Feeling pleased, Koremitsu picked a toy mouse and the extendable tunnel Aoi had recommended for Lapis. They then entered a café.

Aoi poured a large amount of milk into her red tea, and glanced at the sugar pot by the side.

Koremitsu then took the sugar pot and placed it in front of her.

"You wanted some sugar, right?"

Aoi widened her eyes in surprise.

"Yes."

She smiled as she picked up the golden spoon, and added two spoonfuls of sugar.

Hikaru was seated beside Aoi, his hands supporting his cheeks as he stared at Aoi, his face beaming as sweet as sugar.

“I always find that it is very immature to add sugar in coffee or red tea, but I do like to drink sweet stuff.”

She whispered as she tried her best to blow and cool the red tea. She then took a sip.

“It’s delicious.”

She narrowed her eyes happily.

Hikaru too narrowed his eyes in a similar manner.

It felt as if Aoi, Hikaru and Koremitsu were seated at the same table, enjoying tea amicably.

(If Hikaru is still alive, maybe such a day could have occurred…)

To drink with his friend and his friend’s love—the three of them.

If that were to happen, Koremitsu would definitely be intolerant about this loving couple, grumbling ‘stop flirting in front of me now!’ while feeling that warmth, that happiness.

But Hikaru’s physical body was no longer present.

Only Koremitsu could see Hikaru, the latter giving a blissful look at Aoi.

Once Koremitsu noticed a tinge of sadness in Hikaru’s eyes however, he suddenly felt a sharp pain in his chest.

The happy feeling he experienced just a little while back vanished, and what replaced it was a pain throughout his body. Wanting to shake off the pain, he asked,

“Oh yeah, what is it you want to talk to me about?”

Aoi’s shoulders suddenly jumped once she heard that, and she lowered her head as she started to look a little fidgety.

Hikaru seemed a little worried.

“Well… Big Brother Shungo.”

“Tōjō?”

Ah, that’s right. Koremitsu remembered that Hikaru did once mention before that Shungo Tōjō was Aoi’s cousin, and Aoi always called him ‘big brother Shungo’.

After much hesitation, Aoi took a few gasps, seemingly panting, and then tentatively lifted her head to mutter,

“Did Big Brother… say something to you?”

“Oh, Tōjō did call for me when I was on the corridor. Well, what he said was weird.”

Because of that, he was deemed as gay by everyone else.

Upon recalling this, Koremitsu frowned and squirmed. The cup beside Aoi’s hand suddenly rattled.

“I-It’s all just Big Brother’s misunderstanding!”

Aoi frantically argued.

(Misunderstanding? What misunderstanding? Is it the rumor that Tōjō confessed to me? That’s a misunderstanding.)

“Big Brother may seem rational and stoic, but he is actually quite clumsy. He is thinking too much this time… I already told him ‘that is definitely not the case’.”

“Definitely not the case?”

(About me being gay?)

“It-It’s nothing! Anyway, please do not believe what Big Brother said!”

Aoi started to panic, her face blushing all over, her lips squirming.

On the other hand, Koremitsu had yet to understand what Aoi was saying.

(Is she worried about her cousin because there’s a rumor between him and me?)

Koremitsu wondered silently.

Hikaru too stared at Aoi in surprise. He fixated his stare upon Aoi's eyes, seemingly wanting to affirm her thoughts.

Aoi's hands were on her face as she lowered her head.

"A-And so… it is not really a discussion, but an explanation… there is something important I want to talk with you."

Her voice was teeny-weeny.

"I want to talk about Hikaru… something Asa said that made me concerned."

Hikaru's expression changed again.

His expression seemed a little stiffer than before.

"What did Saiga say?"

Koremitsu's tone too became serious.

Aoi's head remained lowered as she spoke with doubt,

"Love… was what killed Hikaru—"

Koremitsu felt something strangling him.

Aoi lifted her head tentatively, and beside her, Hikaru was looking into space with a gloomy expression.

It seemed she wanted to rid herself of the melancholy in her heart as she said,

"Hikaru definitely died of an accident…but from what Asa said, there may be another reason. When the phone message was passed around, stating that Hikaru was murdered, I just felt it was some prank, but after hearing what Asa had said, I am starting to wonder whether it was an accident…because Asa understands things more than I do…"

Hikaru frowned, his expression gloomier by the second. Upon seeing this reaction Koremitsu inadvertently felt his chest ache and his ears rumble.

Did Hikaru really die from an accident?

Koremitsu too had always wondered about this. Whenever this topic was raised, Hikaru would often change the topic, show the same gloomy expression, and remain silent.

It is still not time for me to tell you some things—Hikaru had once told him that; he too had yet to sort himself out, and if he said so, he would definitely feel troubled.

That was why Koremitsu chose not to take the initiative and ask him about this.

He wanted to wait until the day Hikaru wanted to say so.

But Aoi did not know Hikaru was listening in on them.

Would he allow Aoi to continue on with her words in front of Hikaru?

Certainly, Hikaru must have felt arduous hearing his fiancée talk about his death, no?

And so, while seemingly wanting to stop Aoi from continuing, Koremitsu exclaimed,

"I have a question regarding the kitten potty!"

Aoi stopped talking.

She widened her eyes, looking dumbfounded; Hikaru too was the same. Koremitsu was ostensibly panting as he continued,

"A-About…the kitty potty sand… how often do I change it?"

"E-Erm…it is not actually changing the sand, but rather, replenishing it if you find that it is too little…"

Aoi answered blankly,

"I see? So there's no need to change it all and swap for a new one?"

Koremitsu again raised his voice.

But then, he suddenly noticed the surrounding customers looking at them.

“I was too loud… sorry.”

Koremitsu retreated back.

“Well… there’s no need to worry that much about Hikaru. Hikaru definitely doesn’t hope for you to be so frustrated and anguished even after his death. Why don’t you paint a very handsome portrait of Hikaru? He’ll definitely be delighted with that.

Aoi showed a sobbing expression as she clasped her hands, seemingly unable to accept this resolution completely.

“I guess so.”

But she forced a smile.

“…thank you, Koremitsu.”

Hikaru too was looking at Koremitsu gratefully.

“Ah, but though you do not have to clean up the cat’s faeces, if the potty itself is not kept clean, the kitten will pester you to hurry with the cleaning.”

Aoi tried her best to sound optimistic as she reminded him.

Suddenly, the phone in Koremitsu’s pocket rang.

He pulled it out, and immediately frowned.

It was from Shioriko. While Koremitsu wanted to pick up the call a little later, he was a little cornered.

“Sorry.”

He stood up and ran to the toilet, pressing the dial button on the way there.

The sobbing voice immediately reached his ears.

“Dog! Come over now! Come save me!”

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After apologizing to Aoi, Koremitsu dashed out of the café and towards the location

Shioriko described while sobbing.

She abruptly hung up midway through the call, and there seemed to be something urgent.

"Koremitsu, hurry!" Hikaru too looked anxious as he prodded Koremitsu on.

(Damn it! She's definitely doing sparrow hunting again! I should have been stricter with her yesterday!)

Koremitsu's mind was filled with terrifying images, to a point where his stomach was churning in pain.

He kept praying that she would be alright as she arrived at the dark warehouse, and found a middle-aged man dressed in a suit pressing upon Shioriko.

Hikaru's face immediately paled.

"Shiiko!"

"Hey! You lolicon!"

Koremitsu grabbed the man by the collar, dragged him away from Shioriko, kneed him in the abdomen, and sent another punch.

"Wahh! Wait, I'm…"

"Shut up! Scram!".

The man ran off with a nosebleed.

"Hey! You alright!"

Koremitsu carried Shioriko as he asked anxiously, only to hear a slap on his face.

Eh?

Shioriko curled her lips as she glared at him in his arms.

She was the one supposedly attacked, yet she seemed so lively.

She was completely unscathed however, her bag was still on her back, the grass green

pochette was dangling nicely, and she only had two buttons on her blouse undone.

(Eh? Wasn't she crying when she called?)

Just when Koremitsu was feeling skeptical…

"You stupid dog!"

The first thing she did was to lambast him.

And then, she yelled at him from up close.

"You released the sparrow I wanted to get medical fees from! You have to demand for medical fees and get what I want before acting cool and calling someone else to scram! And you don't have the collar on! You're completely useless!"

"D-Didn't you ask me to save you…"

Shioriko pushed Koremitsu aside with her little hands, and stood up, snorting,

"I called you out thinking that a stupid dog can be used as an expendable tool even if it can't catch a single sparrow, but you ruined my plans twice."

I got fooled—

Koremitsu finally understood the situation, and was seething in anger as a result.

"It-It is fine, Koremitsu. It's good that Shiiko is okay."

Upon realizing that Koremitsu was utterly furious, Hikaru hurriedly said so to pacify him.

However, Koremitsu's rage was beyond the roof.

He clenched his fist and got up.

"YOU IDIOT!"

This growl was so loud it shook the tall walls of the warehouse, causing Shioriko to retreat back in shock.

Koremitsu brought his face to the terrified Shioriko, his eyebrows raised, his temples

bulging, his eyes red as he yelled,

"It's because you asked for help while crying that I'm so worried! Don't toy with other people's hearts like that! Kids should go back home and do their homework once they're done with school! You damned brat!"

Upon hearing that, Shioriko's eyes too showed rage.

Her wide eyes showed a sharp glare, and just as Koremitsu was startled, she suddenly reached her slender arms and grabbed his face.

"Argh!"

Though she was a kid, it would hurt a lot to be scratched on the face, and his face was left sizzling as a result.

One could describe the feeling as eating red hot chili peppers.

"Woah! Koremitsu!"

"I'm not a kid!!!"

Shioriko yelled agitatedly.

Koremitsu knelt down with his hands covering his face, his sweating eyes looking through the gaps between his fingers. he found Shioriko gritting her teeth, glaring, showing a depressed look for some reason.

"Don't lecture me, you stupid dog!"

She screamed, kicked Koremitsu in the belly, and ran off with the red bag and green pochette in tow.

"Ugh~ if I'm a stupid dog, you're a crazy cat!"

Koremitsu finally released his hands from his face, ostensibly having bitten on the red chili, and Hikaru then gave a skeptical look as he looked away, muttering,

"Eh… Koremitsu, your face looks a little manlier than usual."

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The next morning.

Koremitsu was a lot more furious than usual as he trudged the dirt path leading to school.

There were bruises on the areas Shioriko scratched, and several lines were on his face, making it really intriguing.

It was no wonder then that such a face would garner so much attention.

The other students proceeding to school were startled upon seeing Koremitsu, peeked at him curiously, and then exchanged some words with each other.

"Argh, it's that damn brat's fault that I'm getting much more attention.

Koremitsu grumbled softly, and Hikaru, following beside him, said,

"They will recover soon. I think it is a trendy thing to have scratch marks on the face."

"Trendy!? Yeah right! I'm not a zebra! If you find it trendy, have scratches all over your body!"

"Eh... well..."

Hikaru was clearly intimidated.

"Can't you change your clothes at will!? Change into a tightsuit with stripes all over it, or you might as well turn yourself naked and paint yourself pink and green!"

"Erm... well..."

Despite Koremitsu being the only one able to see it, such outlandish dress-ups was still beyond Hikaru's acceptance. Thus, he stammered, unable to reply.

"Humph, so you're giving an embarrassed look now, huh? Control yourself with whatever you say."

"No, your face is not to a point of being embarrassing. Ah..."

Hikaru suddenly stopped.

Koremitsu assumed that Hikaru was trying to avoid the subject of the stripes, but found the latter staring at the grass by the riverbank.

"...African Lilies. They were not here the last time... who grew them here...?"

Koremitsu looked over at where Hikaru was staring at, and found a stretch of thin, long green leaves glittering under the sunlight, their stems straightened, and their tips budding with purple-blue flowers. The flowers were small, but they were closely packed, like a bouquet or an umbrella.

Hikaru stared at the flowers with melancholy, and with an earnest expression, he floated to the flowers and patted them gently with tender loving care.

"When I was young... I always thought this flower was the reincarnation of the Wisteria flowers. After the Wisteria flowers landed, new Wisterias will grow again... the floral language of this flower is 'news of love'... or... lover..."

Hikaru stood in the cool morning sun, muttering with a depressed look and hollow eyes; he was practically an elegant prince in a portrait. Koremitsu, with stripes all over his face,

"Who cares."

Could only answer this.

"Let's go."

He said unhappily to Hikaru, and just when he was about to drag the latter away from the flowers, he found Honoka coming from the back.

"Ack."

Koremitsu immediately covered his striped face with his bag, for it would be too embarrassing.to let Honoka see it. He walked sideways like a crab, intending to hide from Honoka.

"...Akagi?"

But she still discovered him.

"Eh… yo."

Koremitsu greeted with a deep voice as he guarded his face with his bag.

"Why're you covering your face with the bag?"

Honoka only gave a quick glance, so she had yet to discover the scratches on Koremitsu's face.

Koremitsu answered gawkily as he walked on,

“The sun's too bright."

"Hm? Really?"

Honoka lifted her head to look at the sun and frowned skeptically. She then lowered her head and said,

"I'd say, did you go out on a date with Her Highness Aoi yesterday?"

"Ah?"

"I saw you with her."

Honoka's tone was so terse his heart jumped.

"No-Not at all. It wasn't a date. It's my first time raising a cat, so I asked her for some suggestions."

Koremitsu's voice was shrill as he sweated profusely.

(Why am I so anxious in explaining this to her!? Damn it, Hikaru! Stop looking at the flowers so reluctantly!)

He glared at Hikaru, and hastened his pace.

Hikaru could not move more than 3m away from Koremitsu, and could only float beside him as he reluctantly looked back at the African Lilies over and over again.

(Ugh~got to reach the classroom fast!)

Koremitsu's hand was gradually fatigued due to the bag he raised. Suddenly, Honoka

looked up at him, and smiled.

"Thank goodness."

"Huh?"

Koremitsu spotted Honoka's smiling face from the edge of his bag, and was inadvertently dumbfounded.

Honoka's tone became cheery.

"There's nothing to hide, right? You must be getting on well with Her Highness Aoi, right? There is no way she will go out with a guy she has no feeling for, let alone walk in the pet shop. You took a long detour, but your feelings have finally reached her. Since you said you never needed another woman, you didn't put my efforts as your Heliotrope to waste. Ah, I still have to update my blog. I'll be going then."

"Wait, Miss Shikibu! Koremitsu was being nice to Miss Aoi because I requested him…!"

Hikaru probably felt that he should bear some responsibility, and wanted to call Honoka.

However, Koremitsu grabbed Honoka by the arm instantaneously.

Honoka turned back in surprise.

Hikaru too widened his eyes.

"There's nothing!"

Koremitsu glared at the startled Honoka, and adamantly clarified,

"There's nothing between Aoi and me!"

Honoka shivered again.

(Why am I so furious about this!)

Honoka stared at Koremitsu skeptically, and then asked with intrigue,

"Erm… what happened to your face?"

"Ignore my face! Don't mention it! Pretend that nothing happened!"

"How am I going to pretend that I never saw those scratch marks!"

"Don't mention that!!!"

Koremitsu inadvertently roared, and all Hikaru could do was to put his hand on his face with a sorry expression.

"An-Anyway, don't say such things while looking like you're about to cry!"

Honoka's face immediately flushed, and she hurriedly waved off Koremitsu's hand.

"I-I-I-I-I-I-I'm not crying at all!! Why am I crying for someone like you so early in the morning!?"

"Not my fault that you look that way! Your eyes are already all soaked, and your mouth's raised!"

"Why're you uttering your own illusions there! That's irritating! A-A-A-A-A-And, don't touch a girl by the arm so casually!"

She grabbed the arm Koremistu held, glared at him with a feeble yet forced expression, and immediately turned to run off.

"Sigh, what a throbbing development this is."

Hikaru sighed.

"How unfortunate. If your face has none of those scratches, you will definitely be more handsome. Girls do pay particular mind to them, so you might want to challenge again once the stripes disappear, for Miss Shikibu's sake. It will be too unromantic for them if a male confesses to them with scratch marks on his face."

"Hey, you just mentioned 'scratch marks'' three times! And I wasn't confessing!

"Eh? You were not?"

Hikaru blinked a few times in surprise, and Koremitsu suddenly felt his face sizzle as he hurriedly turned around and walked away.

"Idiot, how can that be possible?"

Hikaru followed.

"Did you not grab Miss Shikibu by the arm because you did not want her to misunderstand the situation between you and Miss Aoi?"

"..."

"And you have already viewed Miss Shikibu as a girl, no?"

"Well…"

(That's because she really looked like she's about to cry, and I got really depressed..)

"I'm just scared of seeing girls cry."

Once Koremitsu casted out these words, Hikaru again blinked in surprise.

Koremitsu's face felt hotter.

(My mom cried and said 'sorry' to me over and over again…)

"When I see that expression, my chest just feels unbearable… I feel like shouting 'idiot, stop crying!'...that was simply the reason why I stopped Shikibu, not because I like her."

His heart ached simply by saying these words, and a melancholic mist engulfed him.

Koremitsu was most afraid to see girls cry or at least close to crying, and could not leave them alone.

Hikaru then pondered like a philosopher, and said,

"It does not matter how many reasons you give, for I feel the most important reason behind your actions is that they are driven by your own heart… that really surprised me though. Sometimes, I really wonder whether you are being wise or dull."

"I said that's not it already!"

He found more students as he walked on the dirt path. He kept quiet and arrived in front of the shoe locker.

Honoka, who had just ran off, was standing beside the shoe locker, her back facing the door.

Upon seeing this, Hikaru said,

"You see? Miss Shikibu is waiting for you. She must have been wanting to apologize to you 'sorry for saying those harsh things to you', or something like that."

"Really…?" Koremitsu felt a little skeptical.

However, Honoka seemed to be acting a little strange.

It was a rare sight as more and more people gathered on the corridor, everyone seemingly looking at something.

On a closer look, he found a report stuck on the wall.

And once he looked at the details, he was taken aback.

"The Delinquent King is a Lolicon!"

This title was printed in large font on the report.

He read the article with trepidation, sweating more profusely by the moment as his body heated up.

On it was the title 'A certain High School freshman A, hailed as the Delinquent King, has an affair with a grade-school girl in the warehouse?' What!? There was also an attached photo of what looked like Koremitsu, whose eyes were blacked out, hugging (or what looked like it) a girl carrying a school bag.

Someone must have taken a photo of him picking Shioriko up the previous day.

;"After that, A angered the cute kitty and got scratched on the face. Will A and the

cute kitty get on good terms again? This reporter shall continue to keep track."'

And such a thing was written!

(Anyone can tell that it's me in the photo!! And they call me a lolicon—!!!!)

"Koremitsu, calm down, calm down, calm down, calm..."

Hikaru repeated the same line nervously.

"Move!"

Koremitsu pushed Hikaru and the human wall aside.

"It's the lolicon!"

"A loli-loving delinquent!"

"The loliquent!!"

Mutterings could be heard everywhere; the students moved aside without waiting for Koremitsu to take action, giving him vague expressions in response.

"Ugh—!"

(Wait, what am I scared about?)

"Shi…"

Koremitsu started to approach Honoka.

But she lifted her head furiously.

"I can think of oedipus, homo love, large breasts or maid fetishes as personal freedom… but I definitely won't forgive pedophila! You're the worst!"

Her slender leg sliced through the air, and landed right in Koremitsu's solar plexus.

"Ack!"

"Koremitsu!"

Koremitsu knelt on the floor as he bent forward.

"Lolicons are disgusting!"

Such hushed denunciations were then heard.

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Afterwards, Koremitsu encountered something unpleasant.

Koremitsu went to Hiina Oumi of the news club, who wrote the report, to protest but she did not seem to be concerned as she answered,

"I did receive information that Mr Akagi was to date Her Highness Aoi after school, so I followed. Though the date's atmosphere was so nice, you actually ran out of the café suddenly, Mr Akagi. What exactly happened? Ah, right, what exactly is the charm of lolis? From what age did you start to have such a preference?"

She even took the initiative to ask further questions.

And on the corridor, he met his hated enemy—the student council president Asai Saiga—and she too gave a look of disgust, saying,

"I never expected that you would be a lolicon. I suppose I should call for the elementary school students not to approach you within 5m."

Even Aoi was critical of him.

"You said that a relative was looking for you when you went off yesterday, and yet you went to see the girl on the photo? I did not know you would say such lies! I really hate those who lie."

Tōjō however gave him some advice,

"I heard that you like young girls. While I am relieved somewhat, be careful not to do anything illegal."

And the braided class rep placed her hands behind her back, teary-eyed as she backed away, saying,

"I-I-I-I-I always believed in you, Mr Akagi! I really didn't think you're a lolicon! Or that you like a loli! Or that you'll pant hard when you see a loli."

Honoka, seated beside him, was staring at the cellphone like it was a close friend, typing away,

"Uu… so Her Highness Aoi, Kanai and Upperclassman Tōjō are all smokescreens to hide his anomaly."

She grumbled regretfully.

Occasionally, she would turn towards Koremitsu, her eyebrows slightly frowned, looking somewhat angry, confounded and about to break into tears. However, she would immediately raise her eyebrows and continue staring at the phone, saying,

"There's no hope for someone who's into pedophilia."

This prickly situation continued on until the end of school.

"Today… I finally experienced social death."

Koremitsu's already slouched body was slouched further more as he trudged his way out of school. With a quiet tone, Hikaru said,

"I have been wondering, does the term loliquent sound like a delinquent with a loli fetish, or a delinquent that looks like a loli."

"You bastard!! You were thinking about such stupid things when I was being criticized and laughed at!!!?"

"But the term loliquent really sounds weird."

Koremitsu really had the urge to stuff this ghost bastard, who was saying such utter nonsense with a serious look on his face, into a vase and throw it far away.

At that moment, the cellphone in his pocket vibrated.

Hikaru stood beside him, glancing at the screen display, and immediately frowned.

"Is the 'Damned brat' here Shiiko?"

"Who else?"

He spat, and brought the phone to his ears, saying,

"I won't believe your fake crying again."

"A mere dog dares to be this arrogant!? I still haven't forgiven you for treating me as a kid!"

Shioriko answered arrogantly with that cute voice of hers.

(You damn brat. You're small and flat-chested. Anyone will say that you're still a brat in elementary school!)

Just when Koremitsu was about to answer so, she snorted,

"I want you to know that I'm no ordinary kid. I'm going to give you a chance to get rid of your tag as a stupid dog! Come with me! This sparrow is on a different level from the rest! It's a monster!"

Chapter 3 - King of Flowers

"An exhibition of Chimeric Neofinetia Falcata--what's that?"

Koremitsu was looking at the ink-written words on the signboard placed in front of the cultural hall, and read this loudly as he frowned.

On Shioriko's insistence, he put on the dog collar unwillingly.

"The Chimeric Neofinetia Falcata is a type of Orchid native to Japan. It is a horticultural species of Orchids, bred amidst sphagnum. The 11th general of the Edo era really loved it, and its fame grew as a result, till the point where only those with wealth and skills could cultivate it, so you can say that it had become a plant that symbolizes status. Currently, it is easier to purchase them as they are cheaper, but when the economy bubble occurred, five leaves alone fetch a price of 30,000,000 Yen in auctions."

Hikaru continued to rattle on as he stood by the side,

(Ack, leaves for 30,000,000 Yen!?)

"The delicate leaves of the Chimeric Neofinetia Falcata and the flowers filled with fragrance are filled with feeble and yet alluring beauty. To me, they are as unnaturally white as the unnaturally white skin of a prostitute who loosened her clothes to reveal a little of her shoulders. It certainly is elegant yet noble."

Koremitsu did not really care for Hikaru's explanation, but he was wondering what has the Chimeric Neofinetia Falcata got to do with sparrow hunting?

(Is she aiming for one of the customers walking out from the culture hall? But with so many people watching, isn't it impossible to do what she did before?)

He had yet to see Shioriko. She had called him here, so where did she run off to?

Just when he was looking around…

"Come here, dog."

A hushed voice came from the shrub by the road.

There was a small maple leaf-like hand reaching out from there, waving at him.

"Oh."

"Hurry over here!"

The hushed voice was a little anxious.

Koremitsu walked over and found Shioriko with her backpack on, crouched behind the shrub.

"Why're you squatting here like you're using a toilet bowl?"

"Shush! Hide yourself too!"

She pulled Koremitsu, wanting him to squat.

"Hey, what do you intend to do? What's the monster sparrow this time!?"

"Be quiet. Don't talk so much. Just listen to my order, you striped dog."

(Isn't that your fault in the first place, you damned brat!?)

Koremitsu was grumbling deep within, but upon seeing Shioriko glare at the entrance of the culture hall with such a serious expression, he could only remain silent.

Shioriko widened her large puppy eyes, showing a frown on her milky white face, and cringed her body. She was holding the grassy green pochette tightly, intently focused to a point of nearly forgetting to breathe.

Hikaru, floating in the air, watched Shioriko worriedly.

He exchanged looks with Koremitsu and shook his head, indicating that he could not understand what was going on.

(I really don't know what to do with this damned brat.)

Koremitsu curled his lips as he squatted.

The daylight lasted longer as summer approached.

The dazzling sunlight before the sunset scorched the back of their heads, causing them to perspire.

And so, at this moment, Shioriko gasped as she said,

"He's here."

An old man dressed in kimono walked out from the hall, accompanied by a man dressed in suit following from the back.

Koremitsu too was shocked.

(This is the monster sparrow?)

This man was completely different from the fat middle aged man from the past; he seemed gentle, looked regal, and appeared very relaxed.

Would the honey trap of an elementary school kid work on an old man in the higher ranks of society?

From above, Hikaru murmured,

"That man..."

"Dog, punch me."

Shioriko hushed her voice as she commanded.

Koremitsu then inadvertently widened his eyes upon hearing this request.

"Huh!?"

"Hurry up, you stupid dog! You lolicon of a dog! If you're not going to listen to me, I'm going to show that dirty little thing of yours in my phone to the police!"

Shioriko stood up while grabbing the cellphone.

"Oi! Wait a moment, damn brat!"

Koremitsu hurried over.

"Damn you! Hand over the phone, now!"

Shioriko quickly raised her hand to prevent it from being taken. Just when Koremitsu was thinking of grabbing her hand...

"Ahh!"

Shioriko shouted out.

Koremitsu let out of her hand in shock, and Shioriko fell onto the middle of the stairs leading to the hall.

I didn't use that much force, I didn't try to lift her--and I didn't try to push her at all. Koremitsu panicked.

"Sorry, big brother! Don't hit me! I'm sorry!"

"What're you saying..!"

Shioriko covered her head as she crouched down, apologizing profusely, and Koremitsu was completely flabbergasted as he watched on.

"Stop it."

Upon hearing this shout, Koremitsu turned around and found the regal-looking old man who just walked out from the culture hall.

"Eh... wait? You mean me?"

"Are you alright, young lady?"

The old man personally bent down to help Shioriko up.

Shioriko eked out a few tears from nowhere, sobbing as she went to Koremitsu, kneeling down with her arms opened wide.

"It-It's not big brother's fault... don't scold my big brother! Run away!"

"Huh? What? But…"

"Hurry!"

Shioriko latched herself onto the old man's leg, calling for her 'big brother' to run away.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! It's really not big brother's fault!"

"Ack!"

Koremitsu did not understand what was going on, but ran off as she ordered.

After running away for five minutes, he spent another five minutes returning to the culture center, and lost sight of Shioriko and the rest.

"Where did they go?"

He panted hard as he looked around.

The people walking out of the culture hall avoided him like a plague.

"Don't worry. Shiiko will be fine."

"How do you know?"

"Because the one helping Shiiko is Mr Sōichirō Kuze."

Koremitsu curled his lips, showing a frown on his face.

"Who's that?"

"You never heard of the Kuze Corporation? He's the ex-chairman of this Corporation. It has a lot of restaurant chains, and also manages all sorts of business. Though he is now retired, he still actively participates in charity events, and often appears on television. He is also a renowned lover of the Chimeric Neofinetia Falcata, and is known as the king of Orchids.."

"King of Orchids? Are you two friends or something?"

"Hm... We both like flowers, but his preferences are a little different from me. Anyway, he is a highly respected man; he will save an elementary grade girl from from an abusive savage looking big brother, so he is definitely protecting Shiiko now."

"Savage big brother. You mean me!?"

Koremitsu yelled in rage.

"I suppose that is probably how you look to Mr Sōichirō. Shiiko must have planned this beforehand."

"Humph. Shiiko wants to extort money from that old man called Kuze?"

Hikaru's expression darkened.

"Most likely... she can definitely fetch far more money from Mr Sōichirō than any of the other sparrows from before. I guess this is what she hoped too."

"That idiot!! That's more dangerous!!"

It was too reckless of her to extort money from a celebrity who often appeared on television.

"She's still a damned brat after all!!".

At this moment, the cellphone vibrated.

He hurriedly pulled it out to check the message. It was from Shioriko.

"Everything's going as planned. Go back for now."

Once he saw this, Koremitsu's rage was through the roof.

"Going as planned!? Yeah right!? You want to leave me, pretending to be an abusive big brother aside, and now you want to chase me away!? You dare to look down on High School students!?"

Koremitsu had been taking it easy on Shioriko up till this point, for she was still an elementary school student, advising her patiently, hoping that she would change for the better.

However, her actions were sporadic at best, and she showed no signs of improvement.

During this time, Koremitsu had been treated as a delinquent lolicon and an abusive

big brother.

If he were to leave Shioriko alone, she would definitely be arrested and brought to counseling for trying to trick an ex-chairman of a large enterprise. If that were to happen, Hikaru's hopes of guiding her back to the right path would be ruined.

(--Ugh, she intends to call me a stupid dog and leave me alone?)

"Hikaru, do you know where Shiiko and the rest will be going?"

"Yes."

"Right. It's settled. I'm going to sternly educate her. I'm not going to take it easy even if she cries!"

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Shioriko's house was a small apartment.

Though it was not as dilapidated as Yū's apartment, it was not exceptionally luxurious. It was a simple, ordinary apartment.

It was sunset, and Koremitsu, along with Hikaru, stood near the entrance of the apartments. Hikaru had mentioned that Shioriko lived here along with her grandfather.

"Shiiko's apartment is the one in the middle of the second level. It seems nobody else is around; I think grandfather is out at the moment."

Hikaru stared at the window as he said.

And at that moment,

There was the sound of a car braking in the alley nearby.

Followed by the sound of a door being opened.

"Thank you very much!"

A cute childish voice was then heard.

It was Shioriko!

They watched out from a blind spot at the building, and found an elongated glossy black car parked at the alley. Shioriko, with her grassy green pochette dangling diagonally and the red school bag on her back, stood beside it and bowed.

It seemed someone inside the vehicle said something, and she nodded like an obedient child.

"Bye bye, Grandpa Kuze."

She waved her little hand cutely, and watched the vehicle leave.

Once the vehicle departed, her expression suddenly gloomed, and she slowly lowered her head, biting her lips.

(What's with that expression...)

"Yo."

"Ahh!"

Koremitsu hissed, and Shioriko jumped in shock, her twintails and pochette swaying along.

"Wh-Why're you here!?"

Shioriko hurriedly looked away. Having regained her composure somewhat, she showed a stiff expression.

"Didn't I tell you on the message to go home? Don't you understand human language or something? Stupid dog!"

"You think you can chase me away with just a simple message? You didn't return for quite a while; who knows where you and that Mr Kuze guy went off to."

Shioriko widened his eyes in shock.

"You know him?"

"Sorta. I heard that old man loves to do charity work, often appears on television, and is called the King of Orchids."

Koremitsu was simply regurgitating what Hikaru had just said, and looked a little embarrassed; however, Shioriko seemed mystified as she heard this.

"I didn't think a dog like you would watch the news."

She muttered.

"I still don't believe that you're Hikaru's friend, but I do have a better impression on you now."

"Thanks for that. So? Kuze's that monster sparrow you talk of?"

"Yeah."

Barely able to hide her exhilaration, Shioriko fished out a namecard from her pocket, and gleefully showed it to Koremitsu.

It was Kuze's namecard.

"His cellphone number is written on the back too! He really believes that I'm a pitiful kid who got abused, and even says that I can talk to him if I'm troubled. He's really naive."

"You really want to con that earnest looking old man?"

Shioriko was suddenly incensed as she raised her eyebrows and glared at Koremitsu furiously.

"You're a stupid dog after all!"

"What did you say!?"

She glared at the enraged Koremitsu furiously, and said adamantly,

"I'm aiming for 64 million Yen."

"What!?"

(Sixty-four Million Yen!!!!!!?)

Koremitsu was left speechless by this large sum.

Hikaru merely frowned weakly, and it seemed he had known what was going on,

"Damn it! Do you know how much money is 60 million!? That's six thousand 10,000 Yen notes!"

"It's '6,400' Ten Thousand Yen notes. Don't be mistaken!"

"Like I care how many that is! I have never seen a Million Yen before! That's already surreal to me, and you're already dreaming of such a large sum even though you're a kid!?"

Shioriko's face was again flushed with anger.

"I already told you not to treat me as a kid!"

"You're a kid! You think you're playing a game!? You want to con this much money!?"

Shioriko clenched her hands hard and bit her lips. She then said with a hushed voice,

"...I have a way to get Kuze to hand over the money. The only question is how to spend it."

Shioriko's face was filled with such malice it was chilling.

"What idea?"

"I have no need to tell you. Think, you stupid dog."

"And to think I was so worried about you! If you want money, go work hard properly and earn it yourself! Don't take it from anyone else! I'll help you look for a job a grade schooler can do."

Upon hearing how frenzied Koremitsu's tone was, Shioriko seemingly backed away tentatively, only to raise her eyebrows haughtily as she said,

"Humph. A mere dog wants to try and act like a big brother! What is this 'properly' you talk about? You want me to be a good person? I won't!!"

Shioriko's yelled with all her might, her face livid.

Her lips were trembling, her eyes were burning with rage, and yet her face was filled

with a little anguish. Her face was contorted, yet showed the helpless expression of a child. She then held her green pochette with her little hands, showing that forced expression. Her eyes were soaked as she stared back at Koremitsu, and her tone was filled with anguish.

"Because... good people get conned and bullied! I don't want to be a good person! I rather con others than have others con me!"

(What... what's she saying!? Why's she being so unhappy?)

Shioriko's response troubled Koremitsu.

Upon seeing Hikaru pat her on the head with a melancholic look, he was all the more confused, unable to say anything.

At this moment...

"Riko, do we have a guest?"

An amicable voice came from behind.

"Grandpa!"

Shioriko hurriedly ran over.

That man was probably of a similar age as Kuze.

He was a short man, his personality befitting his voice.

"Are you Riko's friend? Thank you for taking care of her."

Perhaps Riko was an affectionate nickname he had for her. The old man bowed graciously and gradually, his body bent to a point where one would worry that his head would hit the floor.

"Eh, no. I never really took care of her."

Koremitsu too was taken aback, and he bowed.

"Th-That's right. I was the one taking care of him. Don't be mistaken, grandpa."

Shioriko blushed as she said.

"Oh my. I'm really sorry. This child is really impolite in her words, but she really is kind."

Shioriko's grandfather slowly said what Hikaru had said before.

"She really is obedient, can cook, and knows how to take accounts. She really is my pride and joy."

"Really, grandpa! Don't say so much to him!"

Shioriko blushed as she tugged at her grandfather's hand, intending to pull him back into the apartment.

But as she did so, she dropped the book he was holding.

Koremitsu hurriedly picked it up.

('Healthy Living Go Club'... I think gramps has it too.)

"You know how to play Go?"

Koremitsu returned the book to Shioriko's grandfather, and the latter thanked him, smiling amicably.

"I'm currently a lecturer at a culture school. Do you like to play it too? How about a match?"

"I don't really know how to. My grandpa is the one who knows."

"That's enough already, grandpa. It's getting cold, you'll catch a cold! Be careful! You get sick easily."

Shioriko continued to tug at him.

"Riko really likes to worry."

"You're being too carefree, grandpa!"

"Eh, and your name is?"

"Koremitsu Akagi."

"Young Akagi, how about you have dinner with us tonight?"

"Grandpa! Why're you inviting him!?"

"Eh, no need for that. My dinner share's already prepared at home."

Shioriko's grandfather was being too earnest; Koremitsu felt ridiculously tense as he never received such hospitality before, and was fidgety as a result.

"I'll take my leave then."

He bowed as he quickly hurried off.

On the madder red slope, Hikaru looked back with a serious expression.

"What's wrong?"

Koremitsu asked, and Hikaru answered with a gloomy tone,

"Shiiko's grandfather just called her Riko..."

"Isn't Riko the nickname?"

"Probably…"

Hikaru seemed unconvinced, but continued to follow Koremitsu.

"That brat's grandfather really is a good person, too courteous that I didn't know what to do. He's completely different from her."

"...yeah, Shiiko's grandfather--Mr Tomohiko is really a good person."

The handsome face lit by the sunset was showing a wry look.

"That is why... Shiiko said that she would not be a good person..."

"Hm?"

Koremitsu could not understand the meaning behind these words.

"She doesn't want to be a good person because she's raised by one?"

"Not that, actually. Perhaps Shiiko is not willing to be a good person because she saw how good people suffer for being too kind."

"...has Shiiko's gramps suffered or anything?"

"Yeah, but I don't know the details."

The chilly breeze blew upon Hikaru's bangs, and he lowered his head slightly. His clear mature eyes showed him in deep thought.

For some reason, Koremitsu felt it was better not to say anything at this moment, and remained silent.

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Once Koremitsu reached home, he found his grandfather Masakaze playing Go alone.

Lying beside him was an opened book, the cover being 'Healthy Living Go Club'.

"Is this the magazine published by your Go club, gramps?"

"Why you ask?"

Masakaze remained seated upright as he tilted his head slightly to stare at Koremitsu. His protruding eyes were like a Yakuza mob leader, showing a sharp glint, and yet he was neither angry nor intending to scare anyone; it was simply that his eyes were naturally like that.

"Gramps, do you know of a man called Tomohiko Wakagi? He seems to be a Go lecturer at a culture school or something."

Upon hearing that, Masakaze frowned hardly, and answered,

"...such a memorable name. Mr Wakagi was once a professional Go player, and I heard he became a lecturer once he retired. I met him once at the Go club, and he guided me through a match once. He really is someone worth admiring. Do you know him?"

"Not really... he's a relative of my friend, so I went to greet him."

"I see... is Mr Wakagi still doing well?"

"Sort of. I heard his granddaughter complain that he gets sick easily, and she was warning him to be careful. He seems to be a carefree person."

Masakaze slowly closed his eyes and raised his lips solemnly, seemingly having recalled something.

He then opened his eyes, and frowned saying,

"Mr Wakagi... is really too kind... and he lived a tough life because of that."

"Tough life?"

"I heard he was a guarantor for his friend, and bore a large debt as a result. He even sold his house to pay off the debt."

These words from Masakaze bore heavily on Koremitsu's heart.

"Looking at how Mr Wakagi is, he definitely doesn't hate that person."

These additional words weighed further on Koremitsu's heart.

With an ominous look on his face, Koremitsu returned to his room, and Hikaru said,

"Shiiko needs the money because she intends to buy back the house mortgaged to the debtor."

"...she intends to extort 64 million Yen from Kuze. Is that the money needed to buy the house?"

"When I first met Shiiko, I told her 'I am willing to pay you any amount for your first time', and she glared at me, telling me 64 million Yen. She even said that she is willing to do anything as long as I can pay up, for she had to get this money no matter what."

Shioriko was only eight years old back then; she was still in third grade.

What sort of feelings did she have back then?

A third grader girl was working hard, forcing herself to her limit just to buy her grandfather's house back.

"Once I asked her the reason, I spent 64 million Yen to buy her house back. Shiiko said that she would definitely save 64 million Yen to buy the house, and told me to take care of it for the time being, not to sell it to others, and for it to be a collateral for her first night. I then requested for her to allow me to send her gifts, bring her out to play, and accept my happiness as my own collateral. Shiiko's situation is a little similar to mine... I really had the urge to help her."

Hikaru said, his eyes becoming melancholic.

(What do you mean by 'it may be a little more than what you think'!? How is 64 million Yen a little!? Damn you, you filthy rich bastard!)

Koremitsu wanted to say this, but chose to remain silent.

Hikaru's mother had died when he was young.

His father then took him in, but as he was the child of a mistress, he had a hard time adapting into the new family.

In Middle School, he left his family and lived in an apartment alone.

Koremitsu recalled the empty, lonely room that was practically devoid of any furniture.

He could imagine how lonely Hikaru must have felt in that frigid room.

Koremitsu too had lost his parents, and he could imagine how Hikaru was reminded of his lack of parental care when he first saw Shioriko.

Koremitsu's mother abandoned him when he was young, his memory of her merely her sobbing face.

His father then died soon after.

Even though his grandfather Masakaze and aunt Koharu were diligently taking care of him, he still wallowed in self-pity whenever he thought of how he was different from other children who had their parents.

If only mother was around.

If only father was around.

If only there were a pair of hands who would welcomingly embrace him, and protect his friends. If only there was someone he could wholeheartedly rely on.

He once shuddered, his head lowered as he prayed such in a corner of his room.

But he knew his mother would never return, and his father would never revive.

He could only suppress his anguish alone.

He would have to get back up if he fell.

He would hide and cry alone if he wanted to cry.

That was fine.

"Shiiko's grandfather, Mr Tomohiko is a very kind person. Shiiko felt that if she were to be a good person, she will not be able to protect her grandfather, and was adamant not to become one. She is working hard not for herself, but to protect her grandfather. She is yet so young... she must have been holding herself back too."

Hikaru's words caused Koremitsu's heart to be distressed.

No matter how lonely he was.

No matter how depressed he was.

No matter how anguished he was.

Koremitsu had to bear everything alone.

Most probably, Hikaru too--

--I can't cry.

Even when Hikaru was suffering, he could only smile thinly.

Just as Koremitsu was unable to smile, Hikaru was unable to cry.

For he kept telling himself not to cry, and that he had to smile no matter what.

"Shiiko really can fake her cry, but when she is really depressed...she can only clench her fist hard and widen her eyes to hold back her tears."

Hikaru's downtrodden eyes were hazed with sorrow.

His lowered neck and voice sounded feeble.

"I did not want to turn Shiiko into a girl who cannot cry."

Koremitsu felt his chest tighten.

(Why is it that this guy always causes my heart to ache…)

Even after death, he was unable to cry, yet he was so sensitive to the pain of others, so compassionate…

(How can he possibly make all the girls around him happy…)

That person really yearned for that.

He sincerely loved every flower, every girl.

When he was alive, he definitely gave his all to them.

'That is my happiness', and even smiled saying this.

Hikaru, who truly loved all the flowers, had a final wish to give all these flowers a gentle farewell.

He hoped that when he whisper his farewell to them, that beloved person in front of him could smile happily.

And just as he loved all the flowers, Hikaru loved that girl who was forcefully putting on a front.

Currently, he too was worried sick about her. Even to a state of broken heart.

"I won't give up that easily."

Koremitsu, who did not know how to smile, stared at this troublesome person of a friend, and frowned unhappily saying,

"I already promised you. I definitely won't allow her to continue fooling others!"

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On the next day,

Shioriko walked out from the elementary school with the red backpack, and widened her eyes in shock as she spotted Koremitsu, wearing the dog collar, right around the corner.

"Wh-Why? Aren't High School students supposed to have lessons now?"

"I said that I'm going to pick up a relative's brat, and took an early leave."

He answered with a serious look, and Shioriko's face was slightly flushed.

"I'm not a kid who needs someone to pick me up! And I'm not your relative!"

She looked unhappy.

"Don't let me see your scratched face until I call you. You mustn't come to my house either. Grandpa will ask 'Mr Akagi, what's with those scratch marks on your face?'."

She spat back spitefully.

"Move aside."

She pushed Koremitsu's arm, wanting to move out.

"Isn't my face like this because of what you did? It's a little better now anyway."

"I see. Again, why did you come here? Didn't I tell you to wait until I call you?"

Shioriko's stare got sharper.

"How can I do that?"

"Huh?"

"I'm your dog. I'll follow you wherever you go."

"What are you saying?"

Shioriko paused for a little while.

Koremitsu then stared back at her, and concluded,

"And so, I'm going to stop you from conning anyone again."

Shioriko's pink lips shivered once she heard these firm words, and her cheeks were flushed with anger.

"I'll expose those photos of yours, you know."

"Whatever. Somebody posted something like that in my school already. Now everyone thinks that I'm a delinquent lolicon."

Shioriko was left speechless.

Her eyes rolled and stammered,

"Yo-You're a lolicon after all… yucks. You're disgusting. Don't come near me."

She retreated, her grassy green pochette swaying around.

(Disgusting? Isn't what you're doing more disgusting?)

Koremitsu scowled.

"Since I, as a delinquent lolicon, is going to be with you, you better give up on conning others. Hikaru also said because that scamming others isn't something a lady should do. If he sees you like this now, he'll definitely be sad."

This was not a lie.

But a fact.

Hikaru was between Koremitsu and Shioriko, staring at them worriedly.

(Hikaru is still worried about you and what you're going through even after his death. Don't disappoint him.)

Shioriko paled as she stared at Koremitsu, completely gobsmacked as her lips shuddered.

"But isn't Hikaru already dead…?"

She murmured, seemingly recalling something.

"He once said, 'I will be with you until you become a lady… you can command me all you want… rely on me all you want. You can buy as many clothes as you want, but do not buy anything that is redundant. There are prawn cakes on the table now… so please be a good child in front of me' that was what he would say."

Her slender shoulders continued to shiver, and she choked on her words--it seemed then that she wanted to yell out her thoughts as she shrieked,

"Didn't Hikaru fall into a river and drown!!?"

Her mortified eyes were thoroughly filled with tears.

Hikaru showed a heartwrenching expression.

Koremitsu too grimaced bitterly.

--I'm not a kid!

Shioriko's eyes were blazing impetuously.

--Don't treat me as a kid!

Those words from her were probably due to the poignancy and furor she felt after

Hikaru died. 'Be a good child', Hikaru had abandoned Shioriko with these parting words.

Koremitsu yelled,

"I'll protect you in Hikaru's place!"

Shioriko's shivering shoulders stopped.

Her mouth was slightly agape as she stared at Koremitsu.

In response to this shocked expression, Koremitsu stared back with conviction.

"If you have anything you want me to do, just tell me! If you have anything you need me to do, just ask me! If you want me to help you, call for me! I'll definitely get there! You're just a brat! There's no way you can handle so many things."

Hikaru gave a thin smile, looking ready to cry as he listened in on what Koremitsu had just said.

Shioriko then spoke with a shuddering voice.

"Hikaru is… completely different from you. You never cut your sideburns, you reek of sweat."

"Yeah. I'm no prince here, but I'll be your dog until you grow up. My friend asked this of me."

His tone was so solemn.

Hikaru smiled.

"--so stop conning others already."

Shioriko closed her lips as she stared at Koremitsu. She frowned a little, lowered her head, and raised her lips saying,

"I won't give up."

She stubbornly insisted,

"The money I plan to get from Kuze… is for revenge."

"What did you just say?"

"Anyway, the Kuze you know of is a charitable man, kind, sincere, often appears on television, some saintly man or something. The real Kuze however isn't like that. What that man did to my father--"

Shioriko became silent.

(Did she just talk about her father?)

"Hey, didn't you say before that you don't know who your dad is?"

"..."

Shioriko bit her lips and turned her back on him.

"Shiiko... what happened exactly?"

The moment Hikaru placed his hand on Shioriko's shoulder worriedly, the latter ran off.

"H-Hey!"

Koremitsu gave chase from behind as he watched that red backpack and green pochette sway. Agile as a cat, she darted through the fence of a house, and ran into an alley.

"You really are a cat!"

If the High School student Koremitsu were to continue the chase, he would definitely catch the police's attention.

"Damn it!"

He grumbled as he continued to chase after Shioriko, still carrying her red backpack, through the alley.

"Wait! You won't run away!"

He was chasing her crazily.

Shioriko would hide in a corner of some building from time to time, and stick to the walls to hide from his sights during other moments, causing Koremitsu to lose sight of her a few times.

At this moment,

"Koremitsu, over there!"

Koremitsu continued to chase on as per Hikaru's instruction.

"Stop right there! You idiot brat! I definitely won't forgive you if I see you cheating someone again!!"

"You can still go back to being an elementary school student now!!"

"Just give up already, you!!"

He continued to yell hoarsely as he chased after the small back.

And amidst this wind, an hour passed.

"Damn it… where did she go."

Koremitsu was panting hard as he stood on the wide pedestrian lane as he looked around. At this point, he could no longer see Shioriko anywhere.

He tried calling her, but the line was busy the entire time.

"Has she blocked my number now!?"

His temples were bulging as he murmured, slamming the phone shut as he nearly broke it.

At this moment, Hikaru seemed to have thought of something.

"Speaking of which, Shiiko does frequent the park nearby. She really likes

the waffles at the shop there."</spans>

"Right, let's go."

◇ ◇ ◇

Koremitsu looked over from under the shade of the Maidenhair Tree, and found a cute twin-tailed girl standing in front of a waffle stall, tearing the waffle in half and accepting it with an angelic smile.

You won't get away this time. Just when Koremitsu was about to take a step forward, Hikaru stopped him.

"Wait, Koremitsu."

"What is it?"

"Mr Sōichirō is over there."

"What?"

An old man, dressed in ritzy clothing, was sitting peacefully on the bench, not too far away from where Shioriko was facing.

"They must have agreed to meet here."

"Looks that way."

Kuze smiled as he watched Shioriko walk to him with two pieces of waffle in both hands..

She sat on the bench, and handed the waffle over.

Kuze's eyes narrowed as he showed a gentle expression. He accepted the waffle, and reached his hand into his pocket--was he intending to take out his wallet?

It seemed that Shioriko did not want him to do so as she shook her head.

Both of them spoke for a little while, and in the end, Kuze kept his wallet. Delighted, Shioriko shyly smiled.

And so, both of them consumed their waffles, smiling away as far as he could see.

Perhaps they were grandparent and grandchild to any onlooking bystander.

Shioriko had once said that she wanted to con money from Kuze for revenge, and even said that the real Kuze was not the altruistic, magnanimous man that was portrayed on television.

However, Kuze was eating the waffle daintily as he chatted with Shioriko. He clearly looked like a calm old man who liked children, and the latter even looked back at him fondly.

"Damn it. I can't hear anything this far."

Koremitsu arched his back as he continued to watch their movements and slowly approach them.

There were lots of White Abelias behind the bench clustered together. Koremitsu snuck in, hid his body, and pricked his ears to eavesdrop on their conversation seriously.

"Big brother… always ordered me to prepare roasted bun or heat up the milk and he'll scold me badly if I don't do well. But...that's my fault."

Shioriko gave an optimistic smile as she said this.

(That pipsqueak~ I won't bully a little girl! I won't ask anyone to warm up the milk too!)

Koremitsu grabbed the twigs, grumbling as he gritted his teeth.

Kuze answered with a compassionate tone,

"Your parents didn't do anything to make your brother stop?"

".....Yes"

Shioriko nodded.

"They even scolded me, and told me to obey my brother."

"Why? Your brother's being so mischievous."

Shioriko looked all the more depressed.

"I'm...not related to them by blood."

"Eh?"

"I'm an adopted kid, brother said."

"Isn't that a lie your brother said to bully you?"

"No."

Her large eyes were gradually filled with tears.

Her pitiful expression was such that even Koremitsu's heart was gripped with gloom despite the knowledge that she was acting.

"Brother said that my papa's called 'Mamoru Yoshikuni'. He said the man is a baddy who gives poisoned hamburgers to children to eat."

"Mamoru...Yoshikuni"

Kuze, who had been pampering Shioriko and gentle in his tone to her, showed a slight change in tone at this moment.

Koremitsu was taken aback once he heard of this name, and the horrifying fact that the man had given poisoned hamburgers to children to eat.

(So is this the 'father' Shiiko talked about? What's with the poisoned hamburgers?)

Koremitsu glanced at Hikaru, and found the latter in deep thought.

"…"

Tears rolled down Shioriko's cheeks.

"I heard that papa was bribed to do something bad, and killed himself once it was exposed. That's what mama and brother said. They're wondering why they're taking care of a criminal's kid...bu-but, my papa's innocent! That's what he wrote in the letter."

"Letter? What do you mean?"

Kuze's voice was a little different from before.

Even his face seemed a little stiff.

Shioriko sniffled as she choked on her words, saying,

"I found a letter from my papa written to my real mama. It should be mama's book…"

"What's the proof?"

"Papa's not a bad person. He's framed, and he has proof."

"What proof?"

Kuze asked as his eyes widened at Shioriko.

Shioriko rubbed her eyes with both hands, and shook her head,

"I-It was very complicated. I didn't understand at all. But I still believe papa was framed by a baddie."

Kuze then gave a calm smile.

"I too believe that your father is innocent."

"Grandpa Kuze...thank you."

Shioriko gave an innocent smile as she narrowed her teary eyes at Kuze.

"Oh yes. Do you mind giving me that letter? I'm on good terms with the police, so I can definitely help your papa clear his name."

Shioriko's face suddenly gloomed as she lowered her head, showing a hesitant look.

"Bu-But...papa noted in his letter not to let anyone else see this letter…"

"Really? I guess it can't be helped then."

Kuze heartily gave up.

Shioriko seemed to be worried about annoying this overly kindred old man as she stared at him worriedly. Once Kuze noticed this however, he gave a gentle smile, saying,

"Keep that letter carefully. That's the evidence that proves your papa's innocence. If there's anything you need help with, come look for me, okay?"

Shioriko nodded, and showed a smile.

"...Koremitsu. There is a car parked there."

Upon hearing Hikaru mention this, Koremitsu turned to the road beside the park in surprise, and found a white car there.

There was a man wearing shades seated at the driver's seat, looking over at the bench.

(Is that Kuze's car…? No, what I saw yesterday was larger and more luxurious.)

At this moment, the large black limousine appeared in front of the park.

Kuze slowly stood up.

"My vehicle is here to pick me up. I'll send you home."

"It's okay, there is no need for that. I need to buy some things at the supermarket later. I can go home by myself."

"I see...the waffles are delicious. Let me treat you to something you like next time then."

"Eh, erm, which one do I choose...takoyaki? Or soft serve?"

"You can choose something more luxurious. Just tell me the next time we meet."

"Okay. Bye bye, grandpa Kuze."

"Goodbye."

Kuze got on the limo and left.

Shioriko waved with a delighted look as she watched him leave.

However,

Once the vehicle was nowhere in sight, she lowered her head, bit her lip--and showed a hideous expression.

"Monster."

She hissed, and returned to the bench.

"Hey, Shiiko!"

Koremitsu stood up from the field of Abelias.

"--!"

Shioriko was left gobsmacked.

Her face was then flushed red. She puffed her cheeks angrily, looked away, and strided forward.

"Hey! You're ignoring me now!?"

Just when he was about to give chase--

A hand grabbed his shoulder from behind.

"Why're you stopping me! Hikaru!?"

"...Koremitsu, I am a ghost. There is no way I can touch you."

Oh right.

Then who would grab him by the shoulder like a familiar person?

Koremitsu turned around and glared furiously, only to see a policeman in tight-fitting uniform.

"There is a police report saying that there is a savage-looking youth resembling that of a convenience store robber, hiding amongst the bushes, staring at a little girl passionately. Is that you?"

"Who's the robber here!?"

"I'll hear what you have to say at the station."

"Hey! Shiiko! Come back! Tell him we know each other! Shiiiko! Hey! Shiiko! Damn it!"

Shioriko probably heard Koremitsu's yells, but trotted off without looking back.

The red backpack slowly distanced itself away from him.

At this moment, the white car from before started to move.

Suddenly, Koremitsu had a bad feeling about this.

"Hey, let go of me!"

He wanted to shake off the policeman.

"If you're not going to co-operate, I'm going to handcuff you."

The policeman warned.

"DAMN ITTTT!!!"

And so, Koremitsu could only follow the policeman obediently.

"It is true that a delinquent king resembles a dangerous person to me when he is squatting in the bushes with such a savage look..."

From beyond his shoulder, Hikaru chimed in with a look of regret.

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(This is good.)

Shioriko looked down as she strolled through an alley in the residential area. "Shiiko! Shiiko!" The voice of that stupid savage-looking dog continued to ring in her ears, but she chose to ignore.

--I won't let you cheat others again!

--Hikaru also said that because scamming others isn't something a lady should do.

(You're annoying.)

She tried her best to ignore the voice she could not shake off.

(I'm going to take revenge on Kuze. I'm going to move back to that house with grandpa!)

There was a small old wooden hut on the first level.

And there was a garden filled with trees and seasonal flowers. Shioriko knew how much her grandfather treasured that garden.

--*Come and look, Shiiko. The Summer Camellia is blooming.*

There were cute white Camellia-like flowers blooming on the tree branches under the blue sky.

--*Wow, they're pretty, grandpa!*

Both of them were together in the garden, marvelling the flowers for a long time.

Once they arrived at the apartment, her grandfather grew Rosy Periwinkles in pots, but would look in the distance whenever he watered them.

And whenever she saw him in this state, Shioriko would look over at the plants restrained in the pots, recall the flowers and trees living freely in that garden, and her heart would ache.

(If I can get that house back, grandpa will definitely call me Shiiko again…)

Suppressing her uneasiness, she lifted her green pochette and pressed it on her flat chest.

There was something very important inside.

It was a letter she found in a cabinet.

The letter that established her relationship with Kuze, the letter that propelled her reckless actions…

--You'll definitely end up hurt.

"...it doesn't matter."

Shioriko exerted strength in her fingers as she whispered.

She suddenly felt a sting in her nose, hurriedly blinked, and moved forward.

The unexpected development had delayed her. If she did not return home soon, grandpa would be worried.

(I don't want to be some fine lady.)

If Hikaru were still alive, perhaps she would not have come up with such a dangerous plan.

But he could no longer wait till she became an adult.

(...it's all Hikaru's fault.)

His fault for falling into the river and drowning.

Shioriko had always insisted on getting a scary, savage yet loyal dog, but Hikaru gave a stupid disobedient dog who was completely useless.

--It is fine to say whatever you want to me. I will agree to any request you want.

--Just say whatever you want to me as much as you want! Rely on me all you want!

Hikaru's carefree smile and Koremitsu's savage look seemingly became one, causing Shioriko's heart to be agitated. Her throat throbbed.

She vehemently told herself to harden her weak heart.

(I mustn't trust him!)

And Hikaru too. He did say that he would be with her until she became a proper lady, that she should just be a child. And yet he left her.

(That guy will soon leave anyway.)

Once bitten, there is no second time. She had enough of seeing somebody kindle her hopes and open her heart, yet abandon her in the end.

She would no longer trust anyone.

She would no longer rely on others.

(I want to buy grandpa's house through my own strength.)

She snivelled as she closed her eyes tight.

It was not the time for her to cry.

She walked on with confident footsteps, climbed the stairs outside the apartments, and arrived in front of a room in the middle of the second floor. She then took a deep breath,

"I'm back, grandpa!"

She opened the door with a bubbly shout.

However, there was nary a hint of the usual reply.

Instead, Shioriko gasped,

"Grandpa…"

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"Damn it. Why's that policeman asking the same questions over and over again?"

It was past evening.

With the sun setting, and the sky darkening, Koremitsu walked on with a look so savage he might be taken for interrogation again.

After the policeman had 'counselled' him in the park, he whisked him to the nearby station, and rattled on things like 'What're you doing over there?' 'I heard that you were glaring at a little girl passionately. What're you planning to do?'

Koremitsu insisted that he was squatting there because he had a tummyache, and was not peeping on them, that he was acquainted with the girl, and that his expression was heredity. He even showed a photo of his grandfather and aunt on the phone.

"How is it? We resemble each other, right? My family looks like this!"

He insisted, and after much difficulty, was released.

"The policeman looked terrified when you said you wanted to call in a relative to testify."

Upon hearing Hikaru's words, Koremitsu again frowned.

The policeman must have assumed he had links to the Yakuza or something, for he was fidgety the moment he saw the photo, said 'No need for that. Okay, I understand', and hurriedly left.

"You should have said that you want to contact a relative."

"Are you kidding me? Koharu will bash me for good if I really do so. That's my final trump."

"I wonder if Shiiko has returned..."

"I'll make a call."

Just when Koremitsu was about to open his cellphone.

"Look at that, Koremitsu!"

Hikaru suddenly exclaimed.

Is there something in the bookshop or something? Koremitsu walked over with a frown, and saw Hikaru slowly drift to the shelf behind the window, pointing at a magazine being displayed.

There were several topics on this tabloid magazine cover, and upon seeing one of them, Koremitsu gasped.

There was a small line on it,

"The truth 10 years after the Poisoned Hamburgers Incident, Sōichirō Kuze's lie."

Chapter 4 - I Was Looking for a Flower

It was Saturday the following day, but Koremitsu woke up earlier than usual.

He checked his cellphone messages, and found that Shioriko had yet to reply to the message he sent her.

"Let's go check her house after breakfast."

"Yes."

Hikaru, dressed in a singlet and pants for indoor use, nodded in response.

Laid on the tatami was a magazine he bought the previous day.

Inside it was the mass food poisoning incident during the Marine Day in Shimane Prefecture 10 years ago.

During that public event, the Kuze Corporation led by Chairman Kuze provided some seafood hamburgers to children.

However, approximately 30 of them complained of tummyaches, and were hospitalized.

The Chairman's Secretary, Mamoru Yoshikuni, who had attended the event, attempted to cover up this incident, but was discovered a few days later, and was lambasted by the mass media.

He had declared that he was acting on the Chairman's instructions, but Kuze was dining with associates in Tokyo that day.

Thus, everyone had assumed that Mamoru Yoshikuni was simply lying about following orders. It was also later discovered that Yoshikuni had accepted rebates from the food suppliers, and so people assumed that he had chosen to cover up this event itself, leading to a larger commotion.

Soon after, Mamoru Yoshikuni died. He was standing alone beside the train platform, and was knocked by the passing train. At that time, a witness had yelled "It's

dangerous!", but he remained still with a lethargic look. The news outlets had deduced that he had intention to commit suicide, and Kuze resigned as executive chairman soon after.

The press conference that time was massive, and he clearly showed a professional attitude admitting to his responsibility. This overly formal attitude however caused his reputation to skyrocket.

But 10 years later, there was a media outlet casting doubt on it.

The report had hypothesized that perhaps Yoshikuni's statement was true, that Kuze really did push blame onto his secretary, and the rebates collected by the secretary was simply a skillful maneuver he had planned during the associate meeting.

It was a magazine that had tabloids as its selling point, so not all the reports within could be true. However, the person named Mamoru Yoshikuni did exist, and it was affirmed that he died in a suspected suicide.

Was he really Shioriko's father? If that was the case, how did Shioriko learn this? Did she really intend to avenge her father?

"The time to appeal has long since expired, and Mr Sōichirō will probably not be wary of a nine year old girl...what we should be worried about however is whether Shiiko really has the evidence that proves Mamoru Yoshikuni's innocence."

Koremitsu faced the basin as Hikaru floated behind him, saying this worriedly.

"First, we have to ask that brat."

The biggest issue was whether she would come clean with what was going on…

On Koharu's command before breakfast, Koremitsu hurriedly repaired the bathroom's drainboard.

Soon after, he immediately hurried to Shioriko's apartment, but there was no reply no matter how many times he pressed the doorbell.

"Is she still sleeping? it's already past 10. Have they gone out or something?"

He tried calling Shioriko, but she did not pick up.

He then sent another message, 'Call me', and went out.

"I'll come back later…"

"Right."

As he was pondering on where to go…

The cellphone in his pocket rumbled.

He assumed it was from Shioriko, but it was not.

Upon seeing the cellphone display, his eyes widened.

"Eh...Shikibu…?"

Why would she call?

She was pouting, glaring at him unhappily when he retired for the day early.

"...yeah, it's me."

He answered nervously.

"Akagi, ar-are you available now?"

This was the first thing that stiff voice asked.

"Huh? Why?"

"Erm, well...just come by."

"Huh?"

"Don't ask too much. Just come!"

Honoka stammered as she designated their meeting place.

After hanging up, Koremitsu muttered to Hikaru intriguingly,

"Why in a karaoke box?"

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He reached there, and found that Honoka was already at the box. She was sitting there on the sofa, looking around as she blushed and fidgeted, while using her hand to tidy her hair and clothes from time to time.

It was a holiday, and Honoka was wearing a cut-soled shirt instead of a uniform, some flashy-looking accessories, and a mini-skirt. She was holding onto a large fabric tote bag.

"Miss Shikibu sure looks amped up for this."

Hikaru looked through the window on the door as he looked at the mini-skirt that could only cover half of the pair of snowy white legs, blowing a whistle at that moment.

Koremitsu too,

(Isn't that skirt too short!?)

Felt very anxious.

He opened the door, and Honoka lifted her head.

"So, sorry for calling you out so suddenly…erm, were you busy?"

She looked at Koremitsu worriedly.

"No, it's nothing…I was just thinking about how to spend the time too."

He blushed as he answered.

However, her face tensed up immediately as she said,

"Erm, just sit down here anyway."

She patted the seat beside her twice.

(As expected, the skirt is too short!)

Koremitsu sat down as she asked, and could not help but look aside. Suddenly, Honoka said with a serious expression.

"…I, thought about it a lot."

"?"

"I was really confused during that time, and I did kick you once…you probably felt unhappy since Kanai's gone, but you probably felt lonelier when I kicked you because I was so anxious, weren't you…I'm worried that you'll head down the lolicon route and never return if I were to leave you alone like this…"

Honoka stuttered as she played with her fingers. Hikaru looked completely interested as he listened attentively.

"Oi, you're mistaken here. I'm not a lolicon."

"I know! I understand that you're going out with a little girl because you fell out of love."

"YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND AT ALL!"

But Honoka looked like she did not hear it as she tried to force a smile,

"It's fine, this is just a temporary thing. You'll still love girls of the same age later on."

"THAT'S WHY I SAID THAT IT'S A MISUNDERSTANDING!"

"I will become your Heliotrope and try my best to help guide you back onto the proper path."

"Help…?"

After a pause, Honoka closed her lips and took out a photo album that had a swimsuit girl on the cover from her tote bag, and put it on her legs.

"Let's look at this and correct your lolicon tendency."

Her face was blushing red as she said with a remarkable expression.

"What are you saying? WAH! DON'T OPEN THAT!"

"You have to look at it no matter what. These may seem like photos of old grannies older than 10 in swimsuits to you, and might scar your eyes, but let's do our best."

Honoka raised her eyebrows as she told him off. She was like a female teacher who gave herself the mission to guide a youth back from the wrong path.

(ARE YOU SERIOUS!!?)

“Here, this page looks very racy, right?”

“UWAH!”

The photo that appeared below showed a large-breasted girl wearing a piece of cloth that either looked like underwear or a swimsuit, lying on the hammock and looking up.

“Thi, this looks exciting too, right?”

Honoka continued to flip the pages. Her face showed expressions of shock. She would bawl, and would even look away from time to time, but she never stopped moving her hand

“Hey, this is good, right?” “This butt feels very springy, right?” as she continued with an excited voice.

What moved her to work so hard?

There would be no other female classmate than her, with eye-catching breasts, nearly-panty-revealing buttocks, nicely shaped waist with a bare navel, who would read this kind of thing together with him.

“So that’s another way of using gravure magazines, huh? It sure is great to read ero-books with a girl.”

From above, Hikaru said this enviously.

As for Honoka—

(Argh. It’s so embarrassing that my eyes are burning. Why must she wear such a stringed swimsuit like that? Won’t it break if someone pulls it hard? Ahh, uuuu, this pose, the joints are almost separating. It looks painful. Hau, wearing only a shirt on a rainy day and sitting with her knees cuddled in? That’s impossible!)

She was secretly crying out.

This girl, Honoka, who was a cellphone romance novel author with the handle name “Purple Princess”, who helped solve females’ love problems and hailed as a master

of love, was actually very late in her maturity.

Up till now, she had never went out with a boy, let alone a date, and now, she was in this cramped box reading an Ero-book with a boy!

(But this is for Akagi's sake. I must work hard to let him know that loliconism isn't right!)

After much agony, she finally asked for help on the internet while hiding her identity as the Purple Princess, leaving a post "the guy I like ran off with a loli. What should I do?"

Normally, the senior onee-chans who were more experienced in this would answer such questions—but she definitely could not ask the Purple Princess' followers. It would be too embarrassing, no, more like a great disgrace here.

She kept wondering about what would happen if her identity was exposed as she looked at the replies below,

"Why don't you just show him the charms of a mature woman? Wear a very short skirt, read an ero-book together inside a closed room and slowly show your mature charms. Finally, show off a daring bikini at the pool to deal the final blow to him."

These were written.

IMPOSSIBLE—Honoka said that as she sat and swiveled on the chair inside her house.

She would sometimes roll around on the bed as well.

(But I can't just leave him as he is!)

And that was why, on this morning, she made up her mind and gave a phone call to Koremitsu's cellphone despite a lack of sleep.

"A-Akagi, this should be enough, right?"

She continued to flip through the magazines as she asked.

Koremitsu's face was very red too as he looked tense.

“I, I can say that…to you too.”

“Do you, have any feelings?”

“No…”

“Well, it’s fine if you don’t feel anything. Let’s take it one step at a time. You’ll definitely have feelings at that moment.”

Once she said that, she flipped to the next page, and there was a photo of a woman with a sexy pose, her breasts lying on the sand, and the straps on her back and waist were undone. Honoka was already dazed at this point, and her thighs and knees placed under the photo album were already full of sweat.

“~—-I, I really wish that I have such large breasts, but I wonder if my shoulders will be tired? Well, Akagi, which breasts do you prefer? This or that?”

She pointed at another photo album’s page as she asked.

There was a woman wearing a pink swimsuit, and her breasts were just large enough to be held as she floated in a ring and gave a wink.

“Which side, huh?”

(WHY THE HECK IS SHE ASKING SUCH A QUESTION ALL OF A SUDDEN HERE!?)

Koremitsu looked away as he was unable to make any sound.

Honoka frowned as she curled her lips sharply and stared at him seriously.

If he answered that he preferred the small ones, she would definitely call him a lolicon.

“This one…”

After thinking for a long time, he pointed at the larger ones.

“Eh!?”

She gave an unexpected voice, stared at the large breasts for quite a while, looked

back at her own breasts, and lowered her head.

(What is it now?)

“Ah…erm, Shikibu, do you like such things?”

“Li-li-li-li-li-like as in?”

“Erm…photo albums of girls in swimsuits?”

“Idiot! How can I possibly like them!? I went to the bookstore to buy such things for your sake. I-I- I-I- I-I- I-I was so embarrassed when I went to pay up.”

“Is, is that so? Erm, thanks.”

“Okay, hurry up and get horny seriously!”

She said that and looked away.

(What does she mean when she says that she wants me to get horny seriously?)

Are these two things related?

There were a lot of things that could not be explained, but since Honoka was willing to do such things for Koremitsu like buying swimsuit albums and even correcting (?) him, Koremitsu felt his chest heat up as he thought about this.

(It’s the same as before. Kicking me without warning, grumbling with such vicious words from her mouth…is it because she’s embarrassed…?)

—Miss Honoka Shikibu here is rather popular amongst the guys, you know.

At this point, he had to agree with what Hikaru said back then.

—There are a lot of fans of Miss Shikibu amongst the girls too. She’s someone they really admire; takes care of others, very frank and straightforward.

“Why are you suddenly staring at my face?”

“It’s nothing.”

“If you have anything to say, just say it.”

“Now I know why you’re so popular.”

Upon hearing these words, Honoka widened her eyes.

“You, you idiot, wha-wha-wha-what are you saying now!? I, I’m not popular or anything?”

“Really? Aren’t you an expert at love?”

Honoka’s shoulders trembled, and she widened her mouth.

“Tha, that’s right. Ahaha. Well, I did gain some experience.”

She stammered.

“You’re really a good person to be concerned about someone like me. Thank you very much.”

“Uu.”

For some unknown reason, Honoka’s voice was stuck at her throat.

“You really have potential there, Koremitsu.”

Hikaru muttered to himself from above.

(What exactly do you mean?)

Koremitsu glanced at Hikaru. Honoka blushed as she said softly.

“Well, you see, I do ‘like’ you anyway…and I have free time now…well, I’m just accompanying you for a while. We, well…Akagi.”

Honoka suddenly turned her face up to look at Koremitsu as she stammered.

She looked like she was struggling inside her heart; her stare moved around, she kept

changing expressions, and she blushed as she lowered her head to say,

“How about we go to the pool next time?”

“Heh?”

Why did she mention the pool out of a sudden?

Koremitsu was stunned to hear such words, and Honoka continued to stare at him seriously.

Unknowingly, Honoka’s knees were sticking right at his. Koremitsu realized this, and his face went hot and numb.

“See, Koremitsu? If you don’t say okay, Miss Shikibu will say something like ‘Never mind then’.”

Hikaru suggested with a sweet voice from above.

And just like the moment when Honoka confessed to him, her expression became sad.

“Never—”

“Okay.”

Koremitsu immediately answered as he did not want to see her crying face.

At this moment, the phone in his pocket vibrated.

This time, it was from Shioriko.

“Sorry.”

He knew it was rude, and apologized, but he had no time to leave the room first as he immediately put the phone to his ears.

Koremitsu gave a serious expression, and because of that, Honoka looked back at his face worriedly.

A sobbing voice could be heard from the other side of the phone.

Is this an act again? No, is she really crying—?

A weak voice could be heard as she said,

“Gra…grandpa, he…”

Hikaru floated down to Koremitsu’s side from above, got close to the phone, and gave a serious expression too.

“Shiiko’s grandfather’s heart isn’t good. He once fell sick this March and got hospitalized. Grandpa didn’t know what happened.”

Koremitsu’s heart immediately sank.

He yelled,

“OI! SHIIKO! WHERE ARE YOU RIGHT NOW!? I WON’T KNOW ANYTHING IF YOU KEEP CRYING! HURRY UP AND TELL ME!”

◊◊◊

Soon after bidding farewell to Honoka, Koremitsu rushed to the hospital, and found Shioriko watching over Tomohiko, whose eyes were closed as he laid on the bed.

She sat on the chair, her body sprawled on the blanket, and she was asleep, ostensibly hugging Tomohiko. Her face was littered with tear marks, and there were still tears on her face.

According to what the nurse had said, Tomohiko fainted the previous night at home, and was rushed by the ambulance to the hospital.

Shioriko probably never slept after that.

She was no longer able to contain her distress, and made the call to Koremitsu. "I'll be right there!" Perhaps his reply caused her to relax a little as she fell asleep while waiting for him.

"Are you Mr Wakagi's relative?":

Koremitsu was summoned by the nurse onto the corridor.

"No, I'm not his relative, just an acquaintance."

"Do you know any way to contact them?"

"I heard Shiiko's parents are dead."

Upon hearing this, the nurse frowned with a troubled look.

"Is that so? When I talked to Mr Wakagi back then, he said he was living with his daughter."

"Daughter...Shiiko's her granddaughter."

"He seemed to have mistaken his granddaughter for his daughter then."

Cognitive Impairment--this was the term he immediately thought of in shock. When he last met Tomohiko at the apartment, they were still able to converse normally...no, Hikaru had realized that Tomohiko was calling Shioriko 'Riko'.

(Is Riko Shiiko's mother or something?)

The nurse's frown deepened, and the tone was somber,

"Little Shioriko has said that he has been like this since last month."

Koremitsu was stunned.

(In this case, Shiiko can't even rely on her only relative? Can a person's Cognitive Impairment be treated?)

He stared at Hikaru, and found the latter looking petrified, seemingly shaken by it.

Tomohiko must have become senile as a result of Hikaru's death. Having endured such shocks one after another, Shioriko still endured the pain silently.

His heart filled with bitterness, Koremitsu gritted his teeth.

"How's Shiiko's grandfather?"

He hissed, and the nurse still looked downcast, replying,

"His condition is stable, but may turn for the worst later."

Koremitsu felt his gut wrench.

(If her grandfather's not around, what's she going to do?)

Koremitsu recalled his father's death, and felt breathless thereafter.

At that time, Koharu arrived at his elementary school and picked him up while he was attending class. When he arrived at the hospital, he found his father lying on the bed with his eyes closed. Masakaze was sitting beside the bed with his head slumped, and upon seeing his expression, Koremitsu knew that his father would never wake up again.

He was merely shellshocked back then, unable to react due to the abruptness, but felt an uneasiness of being dragged into a miasma.

Both Koremitsu and Hikaru knew how it would feel to have a relative pass away.

And Shioriko had only Tomohiko as her relative.

Hikaru bit his lips, his head slumped.

It seemed Tomohiko had to remain hospitalized for a while.

"What do we do about Little Shioriko? She slept in the hospital last night, but she can't go on like this."

And then, Koremitsu said to the frowning nurse,

"Let her come to my house."

◇◇◇

Your grandpa still needs to be hospitalized for some checkups, so come stay at my house for the time being.

Shioriko did not disagree to Koremitsu's proposal.

She watched Koremitsu walk, and followed him with her head slumped.

"Koremitsu, hold hands with Shiiko."

Upon hearing Hikaru say this, Koremitsu watched her hand, and found that her hands were clenched.

Once he held Shioriko's clenched left hand, her eyebrows sagged, and she looked ready to cry.

"Uu…"

She was holding back the tears that were about to roll out, her throat trembling as she held onto his hand.

(It's so cold…)

Koremitsu thought, a sharp pain suddenly poked at his heart.

They first went to Shioriko's apartment, and while she changed her clothes and packed her belongings, Koremitsu remained outside as he made a call home.

Masakaze picked up the line, and after hearing Koremitsu's explanation, remained silent for a little while.

"..."

Twenty years ago, Masakaze's wife left him after tossing him a divorce document, saying that she wanted to find a new lease of life. Since then, he always hated women.

Koremitsu's stock catchphrase 'That's why I say women' originated from Masakaze.

Masakaze had always warned Koremitsu about being too close to women, not to believe them, and even cruelly told his own daughter, "Women are useless". Thus, the relationship between father and daughter was poor.

When Koremitsu brought Lapis home, Masakaze glared at it with a piercing look, asking,

"Just to be clear, is that cat female?"

"Eh, erm...it is...But it's aloof, and won't go about licking you on the face or climbing on your leg."

After much clamoring from Koremitsu, Masakaze finally agreed to it.

"Koremitsu, you better chase this cat away sooner or later. Women are all like that."

Masakaze said that with a frown.

His distaste and distrust of women was to an extent that includes animals.

Thus, Koremitsu felt that Masakaze would not be pleased upon hearing about bringing Shioriko home, and was tentative as he called home.

"...Alright then."

Masakaze said solemnly.

"I'll tell Koharu."

"Thanks, gramps. I'll bring her back later."

"...Okay."

He hung up.

"Good thing grandpa agreed."

Hikaru, who was worried as he stood sidelong, heaved a sigh of relief as he chimed in.

"Yeah."

Now, all Koremitsu had to worry was that Shioriko would not be terrified when she meets Masakaze and Koharu, for the latter two resembled ruffians.

He opened the apartment door, walked in, and found Shioriko standing at the door, carrying her backpack and the grassy green pochette slung diagonally. She was holding a luggage bag on her right hand.

"Woah!"

He was taken aback, not having expected that Shioriko was waiting at the door.

"Is this all your luggage?'

Koremitsu asked, and Shioriko nodded.

"I'll carry them."

Koremitsu took the luggage back, and reached his other hand for Shioriko's hand.

Shioriko did not say a single word as they returned to the old wooden house of the

Akagis. At his doorstep, Koremitsu was trying his best to explain,

"Eh...I have my grandfather and divorced aunt living with me, and well, they look like me. They may look like they're throwing tantrums, but that's just how they look; they aren't unhappy."

"It is okay, Koremitsu. Shiiko has never been scared by your appearance."

Hikaru said encouragingly.

(That's true.)

"But since you're so gutsy, you probably won't be scared."

Koremitsu shook his hand that was holding hers intending to encourage her.

Shioriko widened her eyes in surprise.

"I'm back!"

Koremitsu pulled the door aside, yelling out as per usual.

Koharu was the first to come out from the room.

She was dressed in a rolled up sports shorts and a T-shirt as it was summer, and her hair was bundled up carelessly. This was her usual attire.

She carefully sized up Shioriko, and raised an eyebrow.

"Little Shioriko, is there anything that you're allergic to?"

This was the first thing she asked.

Shioriko was a little surprised, and she shook her head, answering,

"No, I can eat anything."

"I see. Our house rules are that we aren't picky with our food, and we eat whatever we have. If you have something you can't eat, just tell this guy."

She pointed her chin at Koremitsu.

"Shiiko can't eat long slithery stuff, so don't prepare any broiled eel in soy sauce or Yanagawa Pot."

Once Koremitsu said so, Shioriko was immediately taken aback, and bit her lips.

"Relax, there's no way we're able to come up with such luxurious delicacies. Koremitsu, the stuff in the guest room isn't cleared up completely. She'll either sleep in your room or the calligraphy room for the night."

"Oh, right. The guest room's like a storeroom now. I'll go clear it up later. Okay, come in, Shiiko."

"...please excuse me."

Shioriko removed her shoes tentatively, meek and quiet.

There were no slippers, a luxury, in this Akagi residence.

However, a white cat with blueish-purple eyes arrived at Shioriko's feet. It remained a little distant from Shioriko as it spun about elegantly, giving her a cold look.

Shioriko too gasped at Lapis.

"It's called Lapis...she'll play with you later."

That last part was not directed at Shioriko, but at Lapis.

It shook its tail, apparently saying, 'If she has the mood', and immediately turned to walk away. Perhaps it was because it was acutely aware of Masakaze's imminent arrival.

With a hostile Yakuza boss-like savage appearance, Masakaze walked to Shioriko.

Due to his advanced age, the pressure exerted by him was more than Koremitsu and Koharu's. His eyes too were sharper than theirs.

Shioriko's cheeks and shoulders tensed up.

"Are you...Mr Wakagi's granddaughter?"

Masakaze asked with a deep baritone.

"You know my grandfather?"

Shioriko whispered back, and Masakaze spoke sternly, ostensibly fuming,

"I often play *Go*, so I saw him play. His playstyle is not about winning, but a highly upright manner that is very refreshing. I like it a lot."

Shioriko relaxed her face and lips slightly, and Hikaru had his hand on her shoulder, giving a gentle expression as he seemingly supported her from the sides.

Koremitsu finally heaved a sigh of relief.

"You must have been worried about him, but don't worry too much when living here. Just stay here for the time being."

"So-Sorry to trouble you."

Shioriko's face was contorted as she looked ready to break down in tears. Her hands placed in front as she gave a formal bow.

Masakaze nodded slightly, and then returned inside with a frown.

"Koremitsu, the hot water's almost done. Let the guest have a bath before dinner. Don't let her use the cheap soap and shampoo you and gramps use; I got some samples from my workplace. Let me look for them."

After saying this, Koharu too went in.

Koremitsu then said,

"Put down the baggage. Koharu said that the guest room is full of stuff. We can only finish clearing tomorrow, so just sleep in my room or the calligraphy classroom for the time being. Gramps has a calligraphy class there, so the classroom has the stench of ink. It's still much better than the animal stench in my room though. Ah, that room's separated from the main house, so I don't know if you'll be scared there…"

"...it's fine. I can sleep there."

Shioriko calmly answered, her voice as lethargic as ever.

"Oh, is that so? Let's go there then."

Koremitsu then carried her luggage as he led her to the calligraphy classroom outside the main house.

The Japanese-styled room was covered with tatamis and short tables.

He moved the tables to the wall, clearing out some space.

"Okay. You want a bath, right?"

Shioriko put her backpack down together with her pochette, and remained still with her head lowered. After Koremitsu spoke to her with a deliberate optimistic tone…

"Th…"

"Hm? What? You want to bathe later?"

"Thanks…"

Koremitsu saw her reply downheartedly, and was at his wits end.

"...I-It's nothing much. I don't want you to owe me anything, so you can just say whatever you want. Alright, go bathe now. You'll relax once you have a bath."

Shioriko nodded slightly and headed off to the bathroom as per his instruction.

Koharu had prepared a towel, washcloth and a cute bucket containing a shampoo set and bar soap on the washing machine. Koremitsu handed them over to Shioriko, who took them obediently.

Koremitsu reached his hand into the water, and found that it was suitably warm.

The Akagis typically took hot baths, so Koharu must have cooled the water a little for Shioriko to bathe in, as it would be more suited for children.

"Just call for me if you need anything."

Once he said this, he exited the bathroom.

He closed the door, leaned his back on the door, and took a long sigh.

"That Shiiko's being so obedient out of a sudden. I don't know what to do."

Koremitsu would rather be agitated by her arrogant attitude than see her being so downhearted.

Hikaru too looked gloomy.

"Shiiko was like this the last time her grandfather was hospitalized, and I stayed at her house to accompany her. This is the second time, so I guess she's more worried now."

"Can't we cheer her up?"

"We can only be with her for now and talk to her more."

He said dejectedly.

As Shioriko was bathing, Koremitsu moved the blanket to the calligraphy room, placed the air dryer set inside, and made the blanket fluffy.

"Is it not too hot to put a dryer here in such weather? You can dry it out in the sun if you had known."

"It'll get cold at night, so I guess it's fine."

After that, Koremitsu returned to the bathroom, and saw Shioriko in a one-piece bathrobe and her hair wrapped in a towel. The towel bathrobe was knee-high, and could probably have been used as a pajamas.

"Erm...may I borrow the hairdryer?"

"Eh, okay. The dryer's on the wash basin. Just use it."

"...Thanks."

She shut the door.

And then, one could hear the sound of the dryer breathing out hot air.

"In the end, she is still a little girl at heart."

Hikaru inadvertently chuckled.

◊◊◊

They had hamburger steak for dinner, a rare sight at the Akagis.

There were thin slices of red carrots and green peppers. Koharu did tell them not to be picky with their food, but she still spent quite some effort preparing foods children liked to eat.

(Oh yeah. Koharu also has a kid the same age as Shiiko…)

Koremitsu suddenly recalled as he ate the hamburger covered with sweet sauce.

Koharu was divorced because her ex-husband had an affair, and at that time, her child, Koremitsu's cousin, was only 1 year old.

Koremitsu did not know how Koharu and her husband had negotiated things through, and though she often begrudged her ex-husband over and over again, she never mentioned her child, who was with him.

Koharu could never meet her child because of her parents-in-law demands. Given Koharu's defiant personality, this had to be something she had to agree to.

Though she looked and sounded aloof when dealing with Shioriko, one would notice her staring at Shioriko from time to time if he paid attention.

Perhaps she was concerned of Shioriko as her only relative was hospitalized, but as she continued to look at Shioriko, there was a seemingly sense of anguish in her eyes.

(I guess Koharu may have thought of her own kid when she looks at Shiiko…)

Koremitsu thought, and suddenly felt his heart wrench.

There were no conversations at the dining table, and it was extremely calm. Once Shioriko had finished her food,

"Thank you for the meal. It was delicious."

She lowered her head in appreciation.

Once dinner was over, Koremitsu brought Shioriko back to the calligraphy room.

The futon was already dried.

But it was 8pm. Even a child would not sleep that early.

"You want to play a game? I only have Flower Cards and Poker Cards. Ah, there's *Go* too. You know how to play Five in a Row?"

"I'm going to sleep."

Shioriko calmly said and immediately snuggled into the futon laid on the tatami.

"Oh yeah, you didn't sleep last night, huh? Good night then. Call me on the cellphone if you need me."

Just when Koremitsu was about to exit the room, a little hand was tugging at the buckle of his jersey shorts.

"What is it?"

He looked back and saw Shioriko looking up at him shyly, saying,

"Erm...well…"

"What? Just say it."

"Well…"

She still had yet to let go of Koremitsu's shorts as she lowered her stare.

The silence continued as she seemed hesitant.

"..."

(Is she scared of being alone?)

"Alright, I'll give you a special privilege today. I'll be your watchdog for the night until daylight. Just sleep well."

Koremitsu said as he slapped the futon.

Shioriko then spoke softly,

"Let's...sleep together."

"Huh?"

Koremitsu was flabbergasted to hear this.

Shioriko cringed her neck and hid her face. She however continued to hold onto Koremitsu's shorts, and stammered,

"When grandpa was hospitalized the last time...Hikaru slept with me every night. That's why…"

(HEY, HIKARU!!! YOU DIDN'T DO ANYTHING WEIRD TO HER, DID YOU!!?)

Though Koremitsu knew that Hikaru was trying to comfort her, he gave him a doubtful look.

Hikaru hurriedly waved his hands as he stood by the side,

"Of-Of course not, Koremitsu! Why are you looking at me like that? Even though I give my all when comforting women, I will not do anything to a nine-year old girl! I swear that I never did anything to her! I just slept with her normally!"

(THIS GUY'S DEFINITION OF 'NORMAL' CAN'T BE TRUSTED!! HIS IDEA OF MEETING A GIRL IS BY KISSING!!!)

"I really do not have any vile thoughts at all! Really! Are you saying that you can get excited by sleeping with a little girl asking you for help?"

"Y-You idiot! How's that possible!?"

Koremitsu inadvertently yelled, and suddenly sensed that something was amiss.

"No, I wasn't saying that to you, Shiiko."

He then hurriedly explained matters to a worried-looking Shioriko.

Hikaru clapped his hands together, and apologized gently,

"Sleep with Shiiko for now anyway. Anyone, no matter whether adult or child, wishes for another person's body warmth when upset."

Shioriko did not let go of Koremitsu's shorts as she retreated, biting her lips slightly, looking very fragile.

"Guess I got no choice."

Koremitsu carelessly opened the futon, and Shioriko was startled as she clasped her hands in front of her.

"Hey, move over a little."

Looking extremely tense, Shioriko moved a little, and Koremitsu sat beside her,

"This probably is the first time I'm sleeping with someone else!"

Perhaps he was cuddled by his mother to sleep during his infancy, which he had no memories of…

He laid the futon out, turned to Shioriko, and laid down beside her.

Shioriko immediately blushed.

"Don't look at me. Turn the other side!"

She pushed Koremitsu away with her hands

"Huh? You really are fussy."

"I'm not! You have no delicacy at all!"

She grumbled, looking very embarrassed.

"Good grief. Is this alright now?"

Koremitsu turned his back on Shioriko, and immediately felt something soft sticking onto him. He was taken aback by this sense of touch he never felt before, and wondered,

(Kids are so warm.)

Hikaru too laid down beside Koremitsu, beaming as he looked on.

"It certainly is cute seeing Shiiko clinging on your back. How does it feel to

be used as a bolster by a 9-year-old girl?"

(Shaddup! Stop laughing at me! Scram!)

Koremitsu glared at Hikaru, but the latter's grin remained as he observed them.

"Hey...want to switch off the lights?"

"...Leave it on."

(How the heck am I supposed to sleep now?)

"I think it is better to remain as it is. I can see your embarrassed look when it is brighter."

(You big pervert!! Did you say such lines to girls too!!?)

As long as Koremitsu opened his eyes, he would end up seeing Hikaru. Left without a choice, he kept his eyes closed.

Once he closed his eyes however, the sensation of Shioriko's body warmth and breath became more pronounced, and he began sweating nervously.

There was no way he could let his thoughts wander over a 9-year-old.

However…

(A kid's warmth...no, a human's warmth...feels very comforting. Why's it that I'm embarrassed yet relieved when it's like this?)

--and I can only relax when someone accompanies me...

I can't sleep when I'm alone.

Hikaru mentioned this before when they first met.

Don't talk about such weak things. Though Koremitsu had that thought, this first experience of body warmth spreading in his body was seeping into his heart, making it really relieving.

My back can at least provide some comfort for the kid, right?

Did I give some of it to her?

(If that's the case, that's good.)

It did not matter even if Hikaru teased him.

Was that sweet grassy aroma coming from her?

His closed eyelids relaxed, as if melting.

His back, arms, legs were gradually losing all tangibility, seemingly becoming one with that soft thing.

(Damn...I'm starting to fall asleep too...how am I going to be her watchdog…?)

He was unknowingly falling asleep, breath by breath.

Hikaru's gentle voice rang at his ear.

"There's a big kid and a small kid. Sure feels like two kids are sleeping together."

◇◇◇

It was Sunday morning.

Shioriko had already woken up by the time Koremitsu did, and she had changed her clothes.

Through his sleepy eyes, Koremitsu could see her seated by the window, looking at the handphone, probably checking through the messages. He immediately sat up in shock.

"Good morning, Koremitsu. You slept like a log."

Hikaru giggled as the sun shone behind him. Lapis too was beside him as it stared at Koremitsu coldly with its indigo eyes.

(Don't block my vision now, damn it!)

Koremitsu glared at Hikaru, and found Shioriko staring at him.

He hurriedly greeted,

"Mo-Morning. You woke up rather early today, huh?"

He was a tad embarrassed upon realizing how he slept like a baby.

Shioriko too blushed as she calmly answered,

"...Morning."

She turned her head away as she focused on the cellphone.

It seemed Shioriko too was embarrassed by this.

Lapis glanced aside, seemingly muttering 'what a brat' as it started combing itself nonchalantly.

Hikaru continued to beam.

Koremitsu pretended to ignore him as he said,

"Do you want to eat breakfast, Shiiko? After that, I'll go visit your grandpa with you, and I'll go to your house later to water the plants."

Shioriko did not look back at him,

"...Alright."

As she murmured.

The Akagi's typical breakfast was Japanese-styled.

On this day, breakfast included rice that was cooked to perfection, grilled saba fish slices, sticky natto, fragrant dried seaweed, and miso soup that included cabbage, mushroom and bran.

Also, there was milk and oranges, something that was uncommonly seen.

Shioriko finished her breakfast, and even brought her used cutlery to the kitchen.

"Erm...pl-please let me help."

She whispered, and Koharu replied with relief,

"Really? Then please clear up with with Koremitsu then."

"What? Me too?"

"Of course. You want to slack when the guest's doing work?"

"Guess I got no choice."

Koremitsu washed the dishes, and handed them to Shioriko to dry.

Hikaru continued to watch blissfully, whilst Masakaze and Koharu pretended to be aloof as they watched on, scowling.

◊◊◊

Bad news awaited them once they arrived at the hospital.

Tomohiko was still weak, and unable to revert back to his usual lifestyle. According to the hospital, it would be difficult for him to recover considering his age; Shioriko may have already realized this

She clenched her fists, remaining silent.

Tomohiko laid on the bed, unable to get up, but he smiled once he saw Shioriko..

"You came to look for me, Riko."

There was distraught in Shioriko's eyes, but she quickly showed a smile, and said,

"I'll take care of those flowers, grandpa. Don't worry."

"Thank you, Riko. Have the Summer Camellias and Oleanders bloomed yet? The Kumquat should be golden now, right?"

Koremitsu saw Shioriko clench her fists a few times.

Their apartment was merely filled with a few pitiful light-colored flowers in several pots, and had no Summer Camelias, Oleanders or Kumquat.

Shioriko knew that Tomohiko was talking about the house they had before they moved, and she knew that he assumed he was talking to her daughter. She continued to force a smile however, and this wrenched Koremitsu's heart.

Hikaru too frowned despondently.

"I have to get back there before the Summer Camellias wilt."

"Y-Yeah, let's go view some flowers together, grandpa."

Shioriko nodded, and Tomohiko squinted his eyes tenderly. He could no longer differentiate between his daughter and granddaughter, but he really loved them all the same.

He also thanked Koremitsu,

"Riko has been in your care. Thank you for everything."

"Not really. My family's rather happy too. It looks like they're happy with the change in our family."

Koremitsu tried his best to sound courteous as he answered,

But Tomohiko's blissful smile was too heartwrenching for him.

After that, they arrived at the apartment, and Shioriko remained gloomy as they watered the pots indoors and at the balcony.

She clearly sensed that her grandfather was becoming feeble. Though he remained spirited in the hospital as he smiled, he was most likely trying his best to remain that way.

Shioriko's eyebrows were droopy, and she remained silent.

"Let's rest for a while."

Koremitsu handed the baumkuchen and coffee milk he bought at the convenience store to Shioriko.

She was nudged and made to sit at the short, round table, but did not eat.

She merely took the cake out from the bag and held it in her hand.

"Don't you like to eat such things, Shiiko?"

Hikaru spoke to her as he floated to her side; naturally, she did not react.

Koremitsu picked up the baumkuchen from Shioriko's hand, peeled off the outermost layer, and put it in his mouth.

Hikaru's eyes widened in shock.

"Do you not hate sweet stuff, Koremitsu?"

Koremitsu ignored him as he peeled off one layer of cake after another, putting them in his mouth.

(Damn it. It's like my tongue's covered in sugar.)

Shioriko lifted her head as she watched him eat one layer of cake after another in shock. Scowling, Koremitsu then handed the cake to her, and she started peeling one layer after another, eating them.

"..."

"..."

Both of them ate silently.

Hikaru had said before that it was unladylike to eat the baumkuchen one layer after another, and hoped that she would change. However, at this point, he merely watched over them silently.

After some time, the baumkuchen got smaller, and Shioriko put the last bite into her mouth. She lowered her head as she chewed on it, spaced out for a little while, and murmured,

"Grandpa is...a very kind person…"

Koremitsu did not know what to answer, and could only wait with bated breath.

She then continued,

"That's why...he ended up like that…"

She suddenly frowned, and hissed hoarsely,

"That's why I mustn't become a good person."

There was a sinister tinge of emotion in these words, causing Koremitsu to worry and feel a little angsty.

"Why can't you? You liked your grandpa because he's very kind, isn't it?"

"..."

Koremitsu whispered to Hikaru in the toilet.

"What am I supposed to do in such situations? Don't you have any jokes that can make a woman laugh?"

"It is foolish. The situation will worsen if the joke fails to work."

"Argh. How am I supposed to cheer her up?"

"If only we can buy something to cheer Shiiko up."

"Like a toy?"

"Hm…"

Both of them pondered for a while, but were unable to think of anything.

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The aid came at an unexpected moment.

Once Koremitsu reached home, he found a large plushie sitting in the middle of the living room.

"What's this?"

It was a mysterious creature with a long face--the head and body as one, a creature akin to a kappa, a hamster or an ant.

"...It's a prize I got from pachinko."

Masakaze scowled as he said,

"It's a waste to throw it away...so I brought it back. We so happened to have a young guest with us after all."

(I thought gramps doesn't play pachinko at all?)

Koremitsu was gobsmacked upon hearing this flimsy lie.

Did his grandfather really assume that nobody would see through it?

(So gramps went out to buy the plushie? He carried it home like that? Didn't he think of how he looks like a bad guy with this…)

Koremitsu imagined the sight of his scowling, savage-looking grandfather walking down the street with a composite plushie of kappa, hamster and ant, and shuddered at the thought.

(Gramps probably did it to cheer Shiiko up.)

It was clumsy of him, but certainly something he would do.

"Your grandfather is really cool there."

Hikaru beamed.

Can this grandfather, born before the Second World War, be called cool…?

"What's this anyway?"

"I don't know."

"How do you not know…?"

"The shop attendant recommended this, saying that it's a trendy thing girls like most...of course, I'm talking about the attendent at the pachinko shop."

Masakaze gave two dry coughs.

"At least ask her what this name is…"

Koremitsu grumbled, but Shioriko murmured,

"A Capybara."

Koremitsu turned around, and saw Shioriko holding the plushie whilst blushing.

"This thing's called a Capybara?"

He asked, and she continued to stare at it before nodding hard.

Hikaru then gently explained,

"It is a large hamster-like animal living in the Amazon River. There are a lot of related merchandises on the market, and it is popular amongst the girls."

(This weird long creature is popular?)

Koremitsu was a little flabbergasted.

"Ah...Shiiko. Do you want that, erm, Capybara? This cute thing doesn't seem to go well with my family."

Shioriko stared at Koremitsu.

It seemed she wanted it, but was too shy to say so,

"Take it."

And so, Koremitsu took it and pushed it into her arms.

"...Thanks."

Shioriko smiled as she embraced it.

Masakaze pretended to read the newspapers, but in truth, he was glancing at her.

With the plushie in her hands, Shioriko tottered towards Masakaze, and bowed, saying,

"Thank you, grandfather Akagi."

"...I just so happened to win a prize."

Masakaze hid his face behind the newspaper again, probably trying to hide his blushing face..

Koremitsu then ushered Shioriko back to the calligraphy room while she continued to

lean her cheek on the plushie delightfully.

"I'm going off for a while now.Is that alright? You won't feel bored?"

"...I'm going to do my homework."

Shioriko continued to hold onto the plushie as she answered and sat down on the tatami.

"I won't bother you then."

Once he said this, Koremitsu and Hikaru left the room.

"Right. Now to clean up the guest room."

"I really wished I could help. Shall I change into a maid costume and cheer for you 'do your best, master'? Or do you prefer to have a cheerleader?"

"I don't want any! Right, got to do something first."

Koremitsu returned to the living room, and thanked Masakaze.

"Thanks for buying the plushie for Shiiko, gramps. She's much more livelier."

"Just something I won as a prize."

Masakaze continued to insist.

Well, I'll just assume that's the case.

Masakaze's face was shrouded in pessimism.

"Anyway...how's Mr Wakagi doing?"

Koremitsu's heart sank.

"It doesn't...look good."

He repeated what he heard at the hospital, and upon hearing this, Masakaze's frown deepened.

"It looks like Shiiko will be staying with us for a while...I'll try my best to take care of

her so that she won't trouble you."

"I don't find it troublesome at all. It's rude to say such things to the guest."

Masakaze warned harshly.

And with that sharp expression of his, he stared into the air, and looked gloomily, saying,

"Mr Wakagi was my savior. Twenty years ago, when your grandmother left me, I practically spoke with no one; I was frowning, my eyes sharp as knives...nobody in the Go club dared to talk to me, and I felt it was okay to remain like this."

At that time, Tomohiko was the only one willing to talk to him.

--Would you like to have a game with me?

He sat down in front of Masakaze, and asked amicably.

When they were playing, he talked about his own family with a sincere and heartfelt tone.

Matters like his wife passing away, and him raising his young daughter, born to him at a late age.

Though his life was filled with trepidation and failures, that he had the arduous life, there were still things to be happy about.

--The older we become, the more things we will lose, but we will get certain things. I think those things are what we should treasure.

Masakaze was impetuous and distrustful because his wife left him, and upon hearing Tomohiko's words, felt a silent shock in his heart.

Even if he lost something, he gained something.

At this point, he realized they were important.

"The reason why this savage looking man, annoying old geezer isn't alone is because of those words Mr Wakagi said…"

Masakaze must have been reminiscing the past 20 years.

He closed his eyes, looking enlightened.

(Savior…)

Masakaze's words too throbbed Koremitsu's heart.

He muttered,

"Mr Wakagi...really is an unbelievably good man."

--I definitely don't want to be a good guy.

Shioriko once said this in anguish.

But her grandfather saved Koremitsu's grandfather 20 years ago.

Even 20 years on, Masakaze spoke graciously of Shioriko's grandfather--Tomohiko Wakagi, that he was a good man.

This point itself blew aside all the darkness in Koremitsu's heart.

"Say these words to Shiiko next time, gramps."

Masakaze clearly looked flustered upon hearing that, seemingly awkward before he answered aloofly.

"Humph, how would women understand such things?"

"I never thought Mr Tomohiko had such a wonderful conversation with your grandfather. It certainly is an enigma how humans can get along with each other through various ways?"

Hikaru spoke seriously as Koremitsu went from the living room to the guest room.

"I suppose the reason why we became friends is because I saw the moment you saved that old man you did not know from being knocked down back then."

"Such an annoying coincidence."

"But such small bonds have certain significance besides coincidence itself. It really is great that I am able to maintain this bond with you."

"Really? I think it's during the time I went to your funeral…"

"Are you regretting it?"

"What do you think?"

Koremitsu answered coldly, for he was suddenly embarrassed at the mere mention of it, and slid the paper door aside.

What feelings will I have 20 years later when I recall what I did with this guy?

Perhaps Hikaru will no longer be with me…

Upon thinking about this, Koremitsu felt a prick in his heart.

"Right. Time to get to work."

He tried to motivate himself.

It was a lot more work than what he had assumed, as everything inside was a mess. His first actions were to move the bulky items to his room first.

While Koremitsu was sweating away as he toiled, Hikaru floated above as he watched,

"You really are a blue-collared guy, Koremitsu. That is so cool. Ah right, construction work clothes will definitely suit you, like this kind.

He said as he changed into a set of work clothes that did not suit him at all.

"Try wearing it one day and go out to hook some girls. They will surely be mesmerised by your savageness."

(I'm really regretting the fact that I went to your funeral.)

Koremitsu grumbled in his heart.

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After finally finishing the work, Koremitsu returned to the calligraphy room.

Shiorio was seated on the floor, staring at the phone

Her stiff sidelong expression shocked Koremitsu.

(Why's she looking so depressed again?)

The Capybara plushie was placed beside her as she leaned on it, looking grim as she stared at the cellphone.

Was she waiting for contact from the hospital?

(I thought she'll be a little happier once gramps bought the plushie for her. Is there something…?)

Koremitsu looked around the room, and saw no forms of entertainment, just inkstones and brushes.

(Oh yeah!)

He moved a short table that was leaning on the wall, brought it to Shioriko, and dropped it heavily in front of her.

Shioriko widened her eyes, and Hikaru too looked surprised,

"Alright. Let's do calligraphy."

Shioriko's face was full of skepticism as Koremitsu laid out pieces of calligraphy paper in front of her. He then started to grind the ink in a fluid manner.

"Try writing something. Anything you think of."

He placed the pen brush in her hand, and she merely stared at the papers blankly, not moving at all.

"What words do you like?"

"..."

"Ah seriously…"

Koremitsu grabbed another ink brush, reached his arm out from behind her, dipped the brush into the ink, and drew a large word on the paper

Firm and vigorous black strokes.

The lines and curves were filled with utmost vigor.

With bated breath, Shioriko watched the word written on it--the marks left behind by the brushstrokes.

"...Purple?"

"Yeah. That's your name."

Shioriko blushed as she stared at this word, filled with such vitality.

"Right. Now it's your turn."

He then laid out another layer of paper.

She gulped, and slowly moved her ink brush.

And then, she wrote the word 'purple' cautiously.

"Your handwriting looks better…"

Shioriko complained, and Koremitsu suggested,

"You need to add more force here. Just write with more strength."

He did a sample writing on the paper Shioriko wrote on, and once Shioriko took a

look at it, wrote the word on a third piece of paper.

The sticky ink was splattered upon the Japanese writing paper, and she frowned, complaining,

"The ink's squirting out."

"So be it then. Keep writing."

"Argh, it got on my clothes.."

"It'll be clean after washing it."

Shioriko puffed her cheeks as she wrote again, but she groaned dejectedly, unhappy with her attempt,

"How do I make this part a little thicker?"

"Tilt the stalk a little, and use this part to write."

Shioriko continued to write 'purple' over and over again while this conversation continued.

The lifeless, feeble thin brushstrokes soon became thick, larger, and vigorous.

Whenever Koremitsu was depressed or agitated in his youth, he would sit in front of the short table alone, and write.

He wrote on the papers, venting his emotions on it.

And then, he would spread his arms wide, full of reprieve as he laid on the tatami covered in brushstroke words.

Back then, all he could see was a black ceiling, but this time, he saw an angelic boy with soft blond hair, smiling at him with a gentle expression.

It was dazzling, like all the light gathered upon a single point.

Shioriko too began to smile.

"Try writing something else this time."

"Okay."

Koremitsu wrote the words 'blameless', 'upright', 'honest poverty' and 'genteel', wanting her to repeat the words. However, Shioriko puffed her cheeks and defiantly wrote the words 'getting rich quick', 'fast profits', words that a 4th grader typically would not learn in school.

"Your desire's too strong.This 'rich' word is off-shape already."

"What can I do? There're too many strokes."

Koremitsu then wrote a proper looking word with his brush, and Shioriko looked on unhappily.

"If your inner heart is pure, the words you write will be neat and pretty."

"What has that got to do with this!"

Shioriko was a little miffed, and wrote the same word a few times,

"Argh...if a dog can write it well, why can't I do it?"

"You're being greedy by using too much ink now."

"Shut up!"

Shioriko drew a circle on Koremitsu's right arm.

"You!"

She drew two loach-like beard strands on him, and then burst into laughter.

"Hahaha, that's a stupid looking face."

"You brat. This is payback!"

"Kya!"

A large circle was drawn around Shioriko's right eye.

"What're you doing!?"

Shioriko shouted, and drew a spiral on Koremitsu's cheek. In response, he fought back, resulting in both of them having black faces.

From above, Hikaru giggled,

"Both of them certainly are like kids."

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"What's with those faces!? Were you drawing on each other's faces!? Even your clothes are covered in ink!"

Koharu bellowed, and ordered them to shower.

Once Shioriko was done, Koremitsu wiped his face clean, and removed his clothes in the bathroom.

"It certainly looks like Shiiko has recovered somewhat. You seem more adept at cooing kids than me, Koremitsu."

"Who cares about that. That's the only thing I could think of."

Koremitsu retorted impatiently at his grinning friend.

After dinner, Shioriko and Masakaze were playing Five-in-a-line.

Koremitsu and Koharu were commenting,

"That's where you should put it next, right?"

"I'll put it here, if it's me."

And Masakaze, upon hearing their comments, hissed at them,

"Just shut up already!"

However, Shioriko seemed really happy.

Once Koremitsu saw that Lapis was lying on her lap, he widened his eyes, exclaiming,

"That damned cat wouldn't let me touch it ever since it came to our house!"

"Really?"

Shioriko beamed, and tickled Lapis' throat and back to show off. It let Shioriko cuddle itself.

"Lapis likes to be near me too."

Hikaru then proceeded to pet(?) Lapis, and Koremitsu gritted his teeth vexingly. Koharu told him off with a 'Don't be rude to the guest!' for his actions.

Koremitsu moved Shioriko's luggage to the guest room, and laid out the futon. Shioriko stood by the side, looking forlorn as she lowered her head, and after a little silence, whispered,

"Erm...will you be sleeping with me today?"

"Oh, sure."

Koremitsu was no longer as hesitant as he was the previous day.

"Heh, Koremitsu, you have matured quite the bit. You can answer like this if a girl invites you in with 'I don't feel like going home'."

Hikaru chimed in.

(Shut up!)

Koremitsu frowned.

There was no difference between being a bolster for a day or two; it was needless for him to feel awkward again.

Shioriko shyly averted her eyes, and tucked herself into the futon together with the Capybara plushie.

"Do you still want the lights on?"

"No...it's fine. Switch it off."

After dimming the light in the bulb, he laid down beside Shioriko, his back turned

towards her.

And so,

"Not there. Turn...towards me."

Shioriko whispered.

"You said the other way last night!"

"La-last night was different!"

"Goodness."

He complied with her demands, and both of them were facing each other up close, causing her to be overly tense.

Koremitsu too had no idea where to look.

For the petite body, small enough to fit into his clutches, was right in front of him.

And this time, Shioriko, whilst holding onto the Capybara plushie, was leaning her head unnaturally beside Koremitsu's neck.

(Thi-This is harder to deal with than yesterday!)

The sweet aroma of tender grass and soft silky hair were resting upon Koremitsu's throat and collarbone, and the latter tried his best to resist the urge to jump up.

Shioriko whispered,

"...Hikaru...would stroke my hair and kiss my forehead before we slept."

(HEY!!)

Koremitsu looked past Shioriko, and glared at Hikaru.

The latter was originally at the wall, petting (?) Lapis on the back as he beamed at them,. Once he noticed this glare, he retreated, and flailed his hands,

"I simply kissed her lightly on the forehead like a mother putting her child to sleep cutely! I had no other intentions!"

So he replied.

Shioriko continued, clearly feeling lonely.

"And...he would say stories to me until I sleep."

"Wait! Shiiko! That's!"

Hikaru flusteredly tried to prevent Shioriko from continuing.

But she could not hear him, and Koremitsu, who was often teased by Hikaru, finally had the chance for revenge.

"Oh? What kind of a fantasy story did that guy say?"

"A prince's story."

"Oh?"

As Koremitsu expected, it seemed to be a fairy tale. Little girls probably liked such stories.

"In a certain kingdom, there was a handsome prince.The prince really liked flowers...he likes all the flowers in the world."

(So he's the protagonist of his own story. How unabashed that is.)

Hikaru remained silent. Perhaps he had his head cuddled in the darkness, blushing in embarrassment. Upon thinking of this, Koremitsu was smirking within.

"However...the prince really loved a single flower, and that flower vanished. That's why the prince wanted to find a flower that he could love more. However, he just could not find one…"

Shioriko's tone had taken on a forlorn vibe, perhaps due to her loneliness.

The fleeting voice and feelings she would never be able to convey resonated somewhere within him, along with the voice of the girl, his first love which had just ended.

Upon hearing this, Koremitsu gave a grim look.

Why was that?

Certainly, Shioriko's voice and tone was different from Yū's,

Right.

Yū once lowered her eyes, and spoke with a fleeting voice.

---Hikaru said that…there is only one exception… that though they were deeply in love with each other, they could not embrace each other…

---he looked really anguished when he said this…

The lost flower.

He was looking for a special flower he could truly love.

(Yū's words are similar to Shiiko's. Is this...a coincidence?)

In the midst of the dim light, Hikaru's expression could not be seen clearly.

But Hikaru had his head cuddled, his neck lowered.

And because Koremitsu could not see it, he felt frustrated.

(The Hikaru I know is can be called a harem prince, and is good towards most of the girls. But which amongst them does he really treasure most…)

Shioriko's young voice was quivering.

"All the flowers in the world has their own form of beauty, their own cuteness...but the prince could not find any flower that could replace that lost flower...the prince...was really lonely...pitiful…"

Her voice became softer.

"Hikaru's...very pitiful."

Why did Shioriko say such a thing?

Did she feel that Hikaru was similar to the prince who was looking for the flower?

The small hands grabbing onto Koremitsu's chest were tightening their grips.

"Hikaru couldn't find that special person…"

The moist breath was pressing on his neck.

"That's because, Hikaru's really lonely, really pitiful...I really have no choice...th-that's why I hope...when I grow up...I will be really charming...that I can become the good woman Hikaru speaks of, that I can be all he needs--"

She was stuttering, her slender shoulders shivering.

"I actually intended to be Hikaru's bride in the future…"

She murmured sadly.

"I wanted to be cultured, so that Hikaru won't fool around with other girls, but…"

Her little face was sobbing away on Koremitsu's neck,

"Hikaru is...isn't around anymore."

And her nose, resting upon him, was a little moist.

At Hikaru's funeral--

Koremitsu suddenly recalled a little girl sobbing away, her eyes red as a rabbit back then.

Her fists were clenched, her teeth biting onto her lips as she cried with a furious expression.

That was Shioriko.

There was a middle schooler who could easily buy a house, and an elementary girl who went about conning middle-aged men.

There was such a vast difference between them, and yet an impossible meeting occurred --normally, there was no way they could have met. However, a bond formed and chemistry born between them .

Just like how Koremitsu and Hikaru became friends, slowly but surely.

Koremitsu's clumsy fingers took Hikaru's place as he stroked that soft tender black hair over and over again.

"No...I might say that Hikaru's right beside you."

What emotions did Hikaru harbor when he spoke to her?

What did he feel when he heard that she wanted to be his bride?

(Maybe he regretted dying foolishly like that…)

Perhaps he was lamenting the fact that he could no longer touch her hair when she cries.

Shioriko leaned on Koremitsu's neck, snivelling.

"...Go on."

"Eh?"

"The Prince's story…"

"Me?"

Koremitsu had never said a bedtime story to anyone, and was inadvertently flustered.

"Th...the prince's really pitiful if the story ends without him finding a flower…"

"Th-That's true...welll…"

Just as Koremitsu was frustrated, a voice came from the darkness.

"In his attempt to continue looking for the flower, the prince continued to travel, and on a certain day, he found a small Purple Gromwell."

A sweet voice arose, warming the heart within.

"The prince spoke to the white flower, 'don't think that I'm just a cute white flower. I'm a rare flower that dyes the entire world a royal purple. If you want me, you have to give me all your love, blood and money' she whimpered cutely, yet proudly."

Koremitsu begrudgingly said,

"The prince continued to travel, and found a Purple Gromwell in the wilderness. That flower's a pesky brat, and sure is snobbish, yapping away, declaring herself to be a rare flower that can dye the entire world purple, and asked him to take care of her with his love and money."

"What's that all about?"

Shioriko sounded a little miffed as she remained at Koremitsu's neck.

"That's how the story goes anyway. Shut up and listen."

"The prince started to take care of the flower; this flower matured so quick, and was really reckless, shaking its body and petals to attract foul bugs. It was a chore to take care of her."

"And that brat often created a ruckus, attracting bugs by shaking its body and petals, tormenting the prince to no end."

Shioriko then scratched Koremitsu's neck with her fingernails.

"I didn't create commotions for no good reason! Can't you say it a bit more romantic?"

"I didn't say who that person is."

Shioriko would kick Koremitsu, pinch his nose from time to time, but he continued to convey Hikaru's story.

The Purple Gromwell continued to grow day by day, changing little by little, and the prince was so delighted as he watched on.

He could see a different view of her every single day, and was really delighted by this.

He was really happy.

He continued to watch over her, never leaving at all--

Hikaru said elatedly, radiantly.

And Koremitsu conveyed the message.

Shioriko soon quieted down, leaning onto Koremitsu as she cuddled the plushie, listening attentively.

Soon after, snoozing could be heard.

Koremitsu's eyelids were soon bogged down.

Hikaru's voice seemingly faded.

"The prince knew that he'll never change...so he feels happy, blissful as long as he could see the flower change."

The voice soon became distant, seemingly reflecting the loneliness in Hikaru's heart, causing Koremitsu's heart to throb--

However, Koremitsu soon fell into a deep sleep, lulled by that gentle voice.

(...Oh yea, what has this guy been doing while I'm sleeping? Do ghosts sleep…?)

He wondered before he lost consciousness.

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Someone was shouting at Koremitsu's ear.

"Koremitsu! Koremitsu! Wake up! Koremitsu!"

There was a small, soft item pressing against his cheek.

"Please, Koremitsu, wake up!"

He opened his eyes, and found Hikaru staring at him anxiously.

Lapis was tapping his face.

The room was still pitch black.

"Ugh...what?"

He murmured in a daze, and heard a hasty response.

"Shiiko ran away!"

(WHAT!?)

Koremitsu hurriedly got up.

Shioriko, who was originally sleeping beside him, was gone.

He switched on the lights, and looked around.

Her luggage was still there.

But the Capybara plushie Shiiko cuddled was gone!

And also, there was a notebook, probably Shioriko's, laid on the tatami.

"Thanks for your care. I'm going to a relative's house. Please don't worry about me."

Upon seeing the green words on it, Koremitsu was left flabbergasted.

(Where did you go, Shiiko!?)

Chapter 5 - The Whereabouts of the Purple Grass

Hikaru said that there was a message sent to Shioriko's cellphone in the middle of the night.

Once Shioriko saw the message, she closed the cellphone with a gloomy look, pondered for a while, stood up, changed her clothes, left a message in the notebook, hugged her Capybara plushie uneasily, shook her head, and tottered out.

Hikaru could only move near Koremitsu.

He tried his best to wake Koremitsu up, but Shioriko had already left the house by the time Koremitsu woke up.

Masakaze and Koharu too did not realize that Shioriko left their house in the middle of the night.

Koremitsu was riding the bicycle, rushing towards Shioriko's apartment before dawn even broke. But she did not return there.

He went to the hospital, and after inquiring at the night shift counter, learnt that Shioriko did not go there. It was a miss.

"Maybe Shiiko went back to her old house."

And so, Koremitsu followed Hikaru's lead as he raced over on the bicycle.

However, there was no human activity to be seen in the garden full of trees, shrubs and plants; the house was locked, and nobody responded despite him ringing the doorbell.

He returned home wearily. Masakaze and Koharu too were running around, looking for Shioriko; Koharu was asking people if there was a girl wandering in the middle of the night, whilst Masakaze asked the police for help, only to be rebuffed by the impatient policeman, who argued that she should be at her relative's house since she

wrote it as such. That utterly nonchalant attitude from the policeman really enraged Masakaze.

(Relatives? Who?)

Shioriko had no relatives other than Tomohiko himself.

Finally, Masakaze and company went off separately to look for her.

Koremitsu and Hikaru went to Shioriko's school, her favorite park, and any possible places she could be, contacting Koharu and Masakaze from time to time. However, even at noon, they had yet to find her whereabouts.

Koremitsu then went to her apartment, where she lived when she was young, and the hospital.

Feeling guilty, he told Tomohiko that Shioriko went missing, but the he merely smiled and answered,

"Oh, Riko will probably come back when it's dinner."

This made Koremitsu morose. He inadvertently gritted his teeth, frowning.

Upon seeing this,

"You don't have to worry. That girl's old enough now. Maybe she went to find her father…"

Tomohiko calmly stated.

(Father?)

Koremitsu exchanged looks with Hikaru.

Tomohiko mentioned that she was looking for the father. Would this father here be Shioriko's? But her father was already…

"Eh, Mr Wakagi, who's Shiiko's dad? Is he still alive?"

Koremitsu leaned forward and asked, but Tomohiko's eyes seemed to look into the distance as he vaguely answered,

"The father of that child in the tummy...should be somewhere in the Spring hall, feeding the bruins, travelling in the Silver World...carrying the sword of Seto around, watching the pitiful crickets...he may no longer be able to see Riko anymore...it's really tough for Riko to give birth without a father...if she hopes so, I too...wishes for her child to be part of my family.)

(Did he mix up the girl in elementary school with his daughter who gave birth?)

Koremitsu could not comprehend Tomohiko's words at all.

(Spring hall, bruins, what sort of fantasy is that? If he's in the clouds, that means Shiiko's dad is Mamoru Yoshikuni?)

Koremitsu glanced at Hikaru, and found the him pondering with melancholy.

And so, they were still without a clue when they left the hospital.

Shioriko did not return to the Akagis even at night.

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The next day, after seeing that Koremitsu did not sleep a wink for the entire night,

"Koremitsu, go to school today."

Koharu ordered him.

"Gramps and I will continue to look for Shiiko. If there's anything, we'll notify you firsthand."

He was in no mood to head to school.

But he was too tense, too lethargic. Koharu advised him to first cool his head, and go to school for the day.

"Listen to Miss Koharu for now, Koremitsu. You'll faint at the rate you're going."

Hikaru managed to convince Koremitsu to go to school.

Koremitsu sauntered into the classroom with large black eyes. Honoka, typing furiously at the cellphone, stopped in place completely gobsmacked.

The braided class representative, who would typically greet him tentatively, was standing far away, too afraid to approach as she watched on.

"Eh...Akagi, what's with you? You look very tired. You took leave yesterday, are you still not feeling well today?"

Honoka moved her chair over to Koremitsu, and asked this worriedly.

"Did something happen? You looked very jumpy last Saturday."

Koremitsu grunted back,

"...the one at my house disappeared."

"At your house? The cat you mean?"

"..."

Koremitsu dumped his bag and sat on the chair, a bitter groan escaped his dry lips.

It was useless of him to mention this to Honoka.

But he was at his wits end, forced into a corner.

"An elementary...school girl."

And he inadvertently croaked.

"Elementary school girl…!?" Honoka gasped, "Is it that girl in the newspaper report? I see, so she's a relative of yours? What? That's how it is, huh? But, disappeared, as in?"

"...she wrote a message and left my house in the middle of the night. She still hasn't returned!"

"Left house…?"

"I don't know. She wrote that she's going to a relative's place, but I have no idea who that relative is!"

He slammed his head with his hands in fury.

Honoka in response looked more worried by the moment.

"Did you go to the police?"

"Gramps contacted them, but he seems to be angry that they aren't going to seriously look for her. Damn it. If something happens to her--"

If only I had woken up earlier.

I guess it's not the time for me to come to school after all.

Koremitsu felt a knife twist in his gut, as regret and anxiety interwove within him.

"Please do not blame yourself, Koremitsu."

Even Hikaru's consolation was unable to reach him.

At this moment, Honoka spoke adamantly,

"Akagi! I'll help you look for that kid too! I'm going to get everyone's help on the internet!"

Koremitsu lifted his head in shock.

"You...can do that?"

"I'm not sure since I never tried this before...but since you look so down, there's no way I can take this any further...I'll try it then."

Honoka's expression and voice were filled with a yearning to help Koremitsu.

Those direct, straightforward emotions of hers caused the hesitant Koremitsu to harbor hope.

"Ask her for help, Koremitsu."

Hikaru too sounded rather perked up.

"Please, Shikibu."

"Right"

Honoka showed a reliable smile.

(This girl's eyes are really pretty.)

The situation was dire, but her blazing, lively eyes enthralled Koremitsu.

"I'll help out too~!"

"Woah!"

"Wh-What?"

Suddenly, a busty short-haired girl showed her face at the side of the table, causing Koremitsu and Honoka to be taken aback.

"Oumi! When did you come here?"

"Where exactly were you hiding!?"

Hiina Oumi of the newspaper club seemed relaxed as she faced the wraths of two angry glares.

"Well well, the pretty girl reporter appears whenever she wants to. I've already known the rough gist of things, so I can help out as well. Just think of it as atonement for that lolicon report."

She prattled on.

"That report's all gossip anyway. I don't think you're the type to atone for such things."

Veins were popping out from Koremitsu's forehead as he mentioned his grudge vengefully, but Hiina gave a teasing look as she curled her bewitching ample lips.

"Don't worry about such small things. My specialty is in search and investigation; I can do anything. If it’s to investigate the daily life of any male or female, I’ll even scrub the toilet to do that."

"Well...we're in an emergency. I guess it's great that you can help me out. Thanks."

Koremitsu glanced above, and saw Hikaru nod.

"It's decided then! Let's begin our investigation!"

"Hey! Wait! I never said Shiiko's name and school or anything like that!"

"I know everything!"

She answered cheerfully as she bolted from the classroom.

(Why does she know that!?)

Koremitsu was feeling jittery.

"Akagi, I'll begin now. Tell me all about Shiiko."

Honoka had both hands on the reddish-purple cellphone, on standby as she raised her eyebrows, looking completely amped up as she said.

"I~must find her earlier than Oumi."

She murmured to herself, but luckily, these words did not reach Koremitsu's ears.

She took the photo of Shioriko published on the lolicon report with black censor bars, uploaded it to her website, and asked for anyone to report if she was found.

Though this managed to gain a lot of replies, most of them were trolling remarks or ads for erotic websites. Honoka continued to watch the cellphone screen, tapping away at the keys quickly.

During break time, Aoi appeared at Koremitsu's classroom for some reason.

"Are you free now, Mr Akagi?"

Hikaru looked rather surprised, whilst Honoka, tapping at the cellphone, twitched her ears and shoulders.

Koremitsu got up and went to the corridor, whereas Honoka looked aside to peep on them.

"What is it, Aoi?"

Koremitsu walked to the window and looked outside. Aoi stared at Koremitsu with a serious expression, and said,

"Mr Akagi, I heard that a girl a relative of yours has disappeared. You must be really worried, aren't you? Could you please let me help?"

"Where did you hear that!?"

"Miss Oumi…"

(That Oumi! Why did she mention that to Aoi!!!)

Hikaru already had a hand on his head, looking very troubled. He knew Aoi very well.

"You took care of me a lot of times, so I want to help you. I did not do anything for you the last time you were treated as a vengeful spirit, so this time…"

Aoi had a serious and earnest personality.

Koremitsu however was hesitant.

Though he was glad to see Aoi show such intent, she was ultimately different from Honoka and Hiina - a princess in a cage. She's someone very precious to Hikaru. He did not wish to get Aoi involved.

"Thanks for your concern, but you don't have to worry about me."

Hikaru lowered the hand on his head as he suddenly realized something, and interrupted Koremitsu with a poised tone,

"No. Let Miss Aoi help out. You may ask her about the latest events going on with Soichiro Kuze, any special events. Try and collect as much information as possible, no matter how tiny it is. Miss Aoi of the Saotomes will definitely be able to do it."

(Soichiro Kuze? Shiiko's target? That monster sparrow?)

Koremitsu had long since forgotten that name due to the commotion over the hospitalization of Shioriko's grandfather. Upon hearing Hikaru mention this name, he suddenly felt a jolt.

Why investigate Kuze? And is it really good to ask Aoi to do this?

Koremitsu felt uneasy, but asked this to Aoi who has her head lowered in dejection.

"I guess I'll ask you for help then. Do you know about Soichiro Kuze? That old man who often appears at volunteer events."

"Eh, I do...my father attended many of Mr Kuze's study seminars, and Asa is a member of the floral lover club Mr Kuze's chairs."

"Great! Please investigate if there's anything strange going on around him, find anything you can find. Ah! Please remember to be safe too!"

Aoi widened her eyes skeptically at first, but soon broke into a smile. Her face reddened.

"I understand."

"Don't be too reckless!"

Koremitsu too was overly protective when it came to Aoi.

It was not simply because Aoi was Hikaru's beloved, but also because she personally exudes a charm that would cause others to protect her at all costs.

Koremitsu watched the flowing black hair and clear white ribbon gradually disappear into the distance, and turned back to find Honoka inside the classroom, raising the back of her chair slightly, looking at him.

(Woah!)

Koremitsu was taken aback.

Honoka blushed once her eyes met his, and nearly lost her balance along with the chair. After panicking for a while, she puffed her cheeks, and said,

"So you asked Her Highness Aoi for help to find Shiiko?"

"Eh, yeah."

"It doesn't matter, but be careful. Don't get expelled by the Matriarch Asa because you

were flirting with Her Highness."

"I wasn't flirting."

"Oh really."

Upon seeing Honoka pout, Koremitsu felt a little guilty.

◇◇◇

After school, both Koremitsu and Hikaru went off to places Shioriko might have went to.

It was their third trip to the house Shioriko used to live in. Koremitsu conversed with Hikaru as they went on their way.

"Do you think Shiiko's disappearance has something to do with Kuze?"

"Yeah...it certainly is strange for Shiiko to take action now when her grandfather is in such dire condition. Mr Soichiro was her last target before her grandfather fell ill."

Shioriko said that she wanted revenge.

Koremitsu recalled the report on the weekly newspaper regarding the incident ten years ago.

The mass food poisoning on Marine Day in Shimane Prefecture.

The children who ate the seafood hamburger at the community event the Kuze Corporation organized complained of tummyaches.

The Chairman's Secretary, Yoshikuni tried to cover up the incident, and was heavily criticized by the media.

Yoshikuni protested, decrying that the Chairman himself had asked for this to be done.

But Kuze had an alibi, and there was news of Yoshikuni receiving bribes from food manufacturers. Soon after, he died in a train accident.

"Mr Soichiro resigned ten years ago in response to this matter, removing himself from the role of Chairman, but in actuality, he still holds managerial

authority in the company as an advisor. After that article was published however, I do think Mr Soichiro's position is a little unstable. Even if the timeframe for defamation has passed, Mr Soichiro definitely will not tolerate any little commotion. Also, if Shiiko really has evidence to prove Mamoru Yoshikuni's innocence..."

Hikaru lowered his stare in melancholy,

"What do you think? Does Shiiko really have evidence?"

--I found a letter from my papa written to my real mama...

Shioriko mentioned this to Kuze in the park back then.

And she said that her father said that he was innocent in the letter, and there was evidence.

Kuze seemed to be very concerned about that letter, and even asked the girl to hand it over to him.

If that was simply a lie to lure Kuze in…

"...I cannot be certain about that, but."

Hikaru frowned uneasily,

"I did mention about the time when I stayed at Shiiko's house when her grandfather was hospitalized during March, didn't I? At that time, she once threw quite the tantrum because she would not eat the dinner I prepared, and I merely answered 'is that so'. At that time, she sat down with her knees cupped in, so I was worried if she was frustrated over something. She then suddenly stood up, and exclaimed,'Why aren't you angry!'..."

--Why're you always smiling!? I said that I wanted to eat Carbonara, you made it for me, and I didn't eat it once you did it. Why did you simply smile and answer 'is that so'?

--Shiiko, you can eat it whenever you feel like it.

--Carbonara will become soft when left for too long; I can't possibly eat that! Why are you only showing a wry look! Why are you still able to smile! Grandpa, Hikaru, both of you are so weird; why can you forgive others so easily? It's because of that that you're tricked by others, toyed, and slandered--all the bad things happen to you!

She clenched her trembling fists as she shouted, her eyes squinting as she tried her best to prevent the tears from flowing.

Hikaru embraced her, and she slammed her little fists on his chest, sobbing.

"Perhaps Shiiko's reaction back then was because she saw her father's letter, and learnt of the incident ten years ago."

Hikaru's tone was dreary.

He lowered his eyelids, and with a glum look, said to Koremitsu, who listened with bated breath,

"If Shiiko really wants to take revenge for her father, it's not going to be good for her whether she succeeds or not."

Certainly, if Shioriko had credible proof, Kuze may try something to crush her.

Hikaru probably realized the worst possible situation, and looked extremely tense.

Even Koremitsu felt his gut being wrenched.

"Anyway, the most important thing right now is to look for Shiiko. Let us not think of anything else for now."

"You're right."

The duo moved through the silent residence in melancholy.

"Oh yeah. What did you do to Shiiko's old house after you bought it?"

"I would stay there once in awhile. It will decrepit if it is not inhabited for long, and the garden has to be maintained regularly. Shiiko insisted on staying inside only when she gets the money to buy the house back, but she definitely misses the place, and will sometimes head over there, but not often. She would stay by the outside to look into the apartment. In those situations, she looked happy, yet depressed."

"What about the house now? The deed…"

"The deed..."

Hikaru's face darkened.

And then, he showed a thin smile

"After I died, the house is probably under a family member's name. I suppose they will not sell it immediately, however..."

For some reason, they were back on this topic again. It seemed Hikaru was not too willing to answer this, and so Koremitsu remained silent. Hikaru was always like this whenever his family was mentioned.

Perhaps it was because of his standing as the son of a mistress that makes it awkward; thus, there was some distance between him and his family.

They trudged on, and arrived at a small hut surrounded with fence.

The trees in the garden were rich in greenery, and Kumquat fruits were growing from the lush branches. There were also grass and orange lilies growing around. The Summer Cammelias were about to wilt, as several small white Camellia-like flowers were scattered upon the ground.

Koremitsu frowned, and just then, Hikaru widened his eyes.

He seemed stupefied as he remained still.

(Wh-What's it?)

Before Koremitsu could ask, Hikaru nervously said,

"Koremitsu...hide!"

"Huh!?"

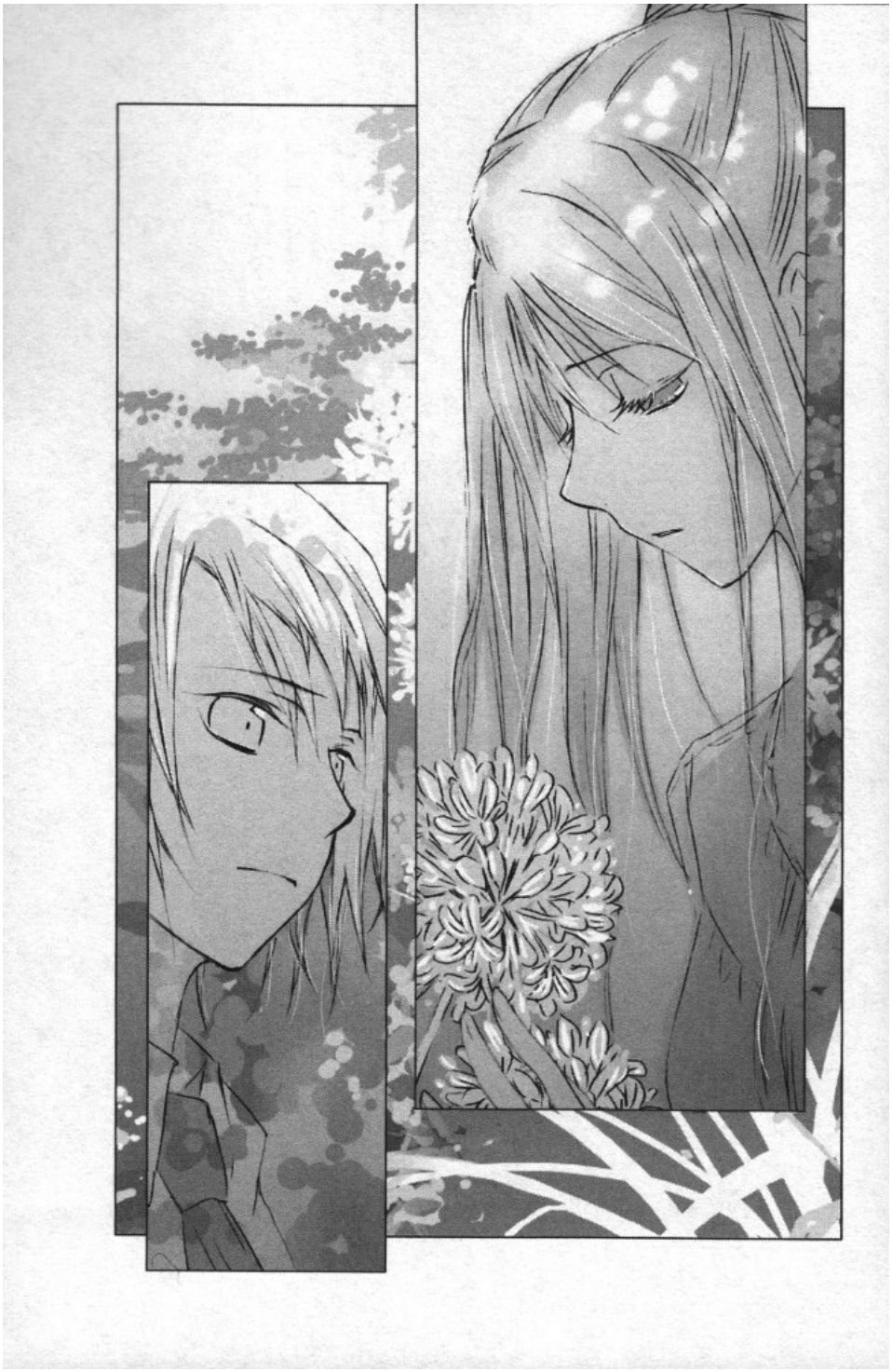
Koremitsu did not understand, but hid behind the fence.

Hikaru eyes seemed to absorb everything in sight as he stared at the fence. He looked deathly pale, not blinking once as he watched on.

Koremitsu saw that there was a woman sitting alone there, and was stunned.

That beautiful woman had long blond hair that dazzled under the sunlight. Some of the hair was draped in front of her chest, while the remaining was bundled behind her neck.

She had white, near-transparent skin, goose-like neck, cute lips, and brown eyes with long eyelashes; At first glance, one would assume she was an exact duplicate of Hikaru…



Koremitsu once met this young woman before.

She was dresssed in a black dress, seated at the relatives' area at Hikaru's funeral.

Back then, Koremitsu was mystified by how much of a striking resemblance she was to Hikaru.

At this point, she was not dressed in mourning clothes, but a soft fabric blouse and a long pleated dress.

"Hey, Hikaru."

Is that person your relative or something?

Just when he was about to ask this,

"...Please do not say anything for now. Just for this short time...please."

Hikaru stammered as he pleaded, about to hyperventilate at any given moment. His tense expression gradually weakened, and he looked frail enough to disappear at any given moment, but the eyes that were staring at her were filled with an indescribable desire.

Hikaru continued to look on, his soul seemingly bounded, his eyes never averting the slightest..

Koremitsu watched from the side, and even he too was being smothered by the pressure, his pulse racing.

That woman placed her long slender legs gently on the floor, her skirt swaying as she strolled through the garden. Once she walked to a certain point, she suddenly stopped, and lowered her head.

That pretty yet crestfallen expression was fixated upon the bluish-purple flower in front of her.

The stem was growing out from the thin, long leaves, and there were tiny star-like flower gathered upon them, blooming.

Hikaru clasped his hands together, stopping the emotions from surging within him.

(That flower...isn't that the flower Hikaru was looking at when I was on my way to school? I remember the name's called the Purple Wisteria.)

--When I was young...I always thought this flower was the reincarnation of the Wisteria flowers, After the Wisteria flowers landed, new Wisterias will grow again…

--The floral language of this flower is 'news of love'...or...lover…

Just as Hikaru petted the flowers gently, the woman resembling Hikaru petted the light bluish-purple flower.

Her gentle actions, and even her mannerism of lowering her eyelids, were exactly like Hikaru's. This made Koremitsu skeptical.

She then showed a melancholic expression similar to Hikaru's, moved her lips slightly, and showed transparent beads of tears in her moist eyes.

The crystal-like tears silently slid down the white tender face.

She also wept back at the funeral.

It was a gentle, forlorn sobbing.

And yet, as she cried, her lips…

"Let us go...Koremitsu. It seems Shiiko is not here."

Hikaru turned his face away, seemingly begging as he said.

(But that person's your…)

Hikaru clearly looked too anguished, his expression pale, his heart that had already ceased to beat, was almost splintered. Thus, Koremitsu did not ask anything, and quietly left, being mindful not to let the woman in the garden notice him.

(Don't you often go comfort women when you see them cry? It's not like you to see such a depressed beauty alone.)

Koremitsu muttered in his heart.

Once they left the house, Hikaru knelt on the roadside, cupping his knees as he lowered his head.

"...Sorry, I am really sorry about that...we have to hurry up and look for Shiiko, but...sorry..."

Due to the trauma caused by his mother, Koremitsu really hated it when people apologized to him. Hikaru clearly knew about it, but his mind was filled with thoughts regarding that woman, and had clearly forgotten about this fact. One could tell at first glance that Hikaru's feelings were not that simple; they were bitter, tormenting.

At this moment, Hikaru could say nary a 'sorry' as he remained silent, sealing his inner heart.

And Koremitsu stood beside Hikaru without saying anything.

The radiant sunlight indicating the arrival of summer rained down from the blue sky, scorching Koremitsu's face. He narrowed his eyes, thinking to himself that he hoped to at least be Hikaru's shelter when he is feeling down.

Curiously, Koremitsu did not know whether ghosts would feel heat…

"..."

Once the sunlight weakened slightly, Hikaru finally lifted his head.

He looked over at Koremitsu tentatively, and found him looking back docilely.

"Shiiko is not inside that house, right? Let's go look somewhere else."

Upon hearing Koremitsu say this with his usual tone, Hikaru winced a little before relaxing his shoulders in relief, muttering,

"Thank you."

"Oh…"

Koremitsu coldly answered.

At this moment, the cellphone in his pocket rang.

It was from Honoka.

"Akagi! I got information from someone who claimed to have seen Shiiko!"

Hikaru immediately sat upright.

The informant was a male who follows pop idols. He mentioned that during noon, while he was waiting for an idol to appear in front of the TV Bureau, he spotted a man in suit escorting a girl who was most probably in elementary school.

"He said that she's a pretty girl even all the current child actors can't hold a candle to, and regretted that he only watched without taking a picture. That twin-tailed girl has a grassy green pochette, and looks just like Shiiko."

"Which TV studio is that?"

"Eh…?"

Honoka stated the name of the studio.

At this moment, another call came.

"Hello hello? Is that Mr Akagi? I heard that there's something similar to little Shiiko eating with a fat old man with an expensive watch at a hotel restaurant. It seems people are calling that old man 'director'."

The posh hotel Hiina mentioned was near the TV studio Honoka had just notified him about.

Koremitsu cut the line, and exchanged looks with Hikaru.

"What's going on? That brat wants to be an artiste?"

"Impossible. Shiiko has been scouted so many times, but has insisted on not being an actress because of her mother. She would not accept any name cards at all."

Hikaru spoke sternly, and this time, Aoi called.

"Mr Akagi, you asked me to investigate about Mr Kuze, so I asked father and the other elders. A friend of mine in school is also about to be betrothed to Mr Kuze's son."

From what Aoi had gathered, it seemed that in Kuze's company, there was a power struggle between the secret backer Kuze and the current chairperson. Kuze wanted his sons to take over the company, but his three sons were very foolish, and the new chairman's party was hoping to expel Kuze's power entirely and take over it completely.

The director called Gohara was the main general under the chairman's side, and it was said he took a very cute girl away, hoping for her to be an image spokesperson artiste for the company.

(That image spokesperson is…)

This completely matched the information Honoka and Hiina gave.

Koremitsu stared at Hikaru, who nodded grimly.

Aoi then said tensely,

"I think that girl is Shiiko, the one you are looking for."

And then, she suggested with a serious tone,

"Mr Akagi, how about we go visit the Goharas? I once met Mr Gohara at a party before. If I accompany you, perhaps you may meet him."

◇◇◇

Koremitsu begged many times to Aoi, telling her that she could just tell him the address, but she would not tell.

"I will not tell you if you do not let me come along."

She insisted, and so, both of them arrived at the Gohras.

"I called the company, and was told that Mr Gohara is on leave today. He should be here if that is the case."

"Hey, Aoi. You can just accompany me here. You already helped me out a lot here. You can go back now."

The sky was dyed golden, and Koremitsu hoped she would return home before it got dark.

However, she swayed her long flowing black hair, and said,

"No. If you go in alone, they might think of you as a hooligan and call the police to take you away. You will gain some more unwarranted slanders in school again."

She looked up at Koremitsu with clear sparkling eyes.

Koremitsu knew that she was worried about him, and was inadvertently touched, but felt worried,

"Miss Aoi sure is very stubborn."

Hikaru too looked to have given up as he muttered,

"So you were with that wild dog after all."

A chilly voice suddenly rang, and Koremitsu turned back to see Asai walking out from the back seat of an annoying looking Rolls-Royce.

"Asa…!"

(Saiga!)

"You retired for the day without telling me, and I was worried. I heard you went to your grandfather's factory, and even visited the uncles at the Konoes and Master Kiyoshi of the Takatsukasas."

"Sorry, Asa, that is…"

Asai clasped Aoi's hands tightly, seemingly protecting her, and turned towards Koremitsu, giving a chiding look.

"Do not get Aoi involved in troublesome matters. Gohara and the girl you are looking for are not here. It is better for you to leave before things get out of hand, and before your infamous reputation in school worsens."

"You are being too much, Asa. I insisted on helping. Mr Akagi did no wrong."

Koremitsu hissed,

"...you knew?"

Aoi, who was protesting against Asai, gasped upon hearing this.

"Since you are so certain that Gohara and Shiiko aren't here, that means 'you know' where those two are?"

The blazing eyes were staring forcefully at Asai's pretty, stoic face.

Aoi and Hikaru held their breaths as they watched Koremitsu.

"What is it then!? Asai Saiga!"

The rage in his eyes looked as if fire could surge out from them. One had to wonder what would happen if it were to burn the ice-like stoic face of Asai's.

Asai coldly answered,

"I do know--"

Koremitsu clenched his fists.

"But I have no obligation to tell you."

Upon hearing Asai's unsympathetic declaration, Koremitsu's face winced as he glared furiously, and he took a step forward.

The killing intent he gave off caused Aoi to shiver in trepidation, whereas Asai's condescending look remained unchanged.

"Are you seriously going to threaten me to spill the information with a barbaric method?)

(This woman is really, damn annoying. She's always thinking of me as an enemy or a lowlife. If she's not a woman, I would have beaten her up already.)

Koremitsu took the last step forward.

"Koremitsu!"

Hikaru frantically yelled.

The smile disappeared from Asai's face.

"!"

Koremitsu suddenly knelt down at Asai's feet, pressed his head heavily onto the floor, and yelled with a firm, determined voice,

"Please! Tell me where Shiiko is!"

Chapter 6 - Father's Letter

(I can't remain as a kid.)

Shioriko held onto her grassy green pochette with her little hands.

Her legs were trembling, her heart was pounding wildly. Cold sweat trickled as her limbs got colder by the moment.

The vehicle transported her to an old Earl's villa.

The moonlight shone upon the English-styled garden and the retro mansion. Normally, this place would be open to the public; after a stroll in the garden, one could head in for afternoon tea.

However, the old earl's villa was booked for the day by Soichiro Kuze's charity organization. It was to be used as part of their regular meetings.

Gohara, who brought Shioriko along, said that the attendees were famous, prominent political and economical figures.

Soon after, Shioriko would head into their meeting.

--Do you want me to prove your father's innocence with you?

The man with the sinister smile, wearing a burnished watch, asked her this the previous day.

Before that moment, his subordinates had already contacted Shioriko.

It was during the moment when she deliberately mentioned Mamoru Yoshikuni to Kuze at the park, that there was a letter that could be used as evidence. On her way home, a white sedan drove near her, and a man in a suit, probably a white-collared worker, walked out from it.

--I am the subordinate of a certain person. May I ask whether you did that just now because you knew Mr Soichiro Kuze was the culprit who shifted the blame upon your father, tarnished his name, and drove him to suicide?

The man had seen through Shioriko's intentions, making her wary.

--If that is really the case, my superior has the same goals as you. If you really wish to take avenge your father, please call this number.

After that, the man gave her a calling card with a cellphone number and mail address.

Shioriko originally has no intentions to contact the man.

For she was still afraid.

However, Tomohiko was hospitalized again, and his health was worse than before, causing Shioriko to be at a loss to what to do. Anxiety, trepidation, jitters and despair rose in her, and she was almost breaking down.

Will grandpa die?

No, that's impossible. Grandpa will definitely be discharged soon. I'll be able to water the plants with him soon.

However, Hikaru, who was much younger than her grandfather, suddenly passed away. Perhaps he would really die.

The moment she thought of this, her heart was about to wither.

She decided that to help Tomohiko recover, she would con Kuze of his money, and buy the house back.

She found the envelope in the wardrobe, back when she was preparing the amenities needed for the hospital stay when Tomohiko was hospitalized for the first time.

The recipient was her mother, and in her curiosity, she took the letter out. Once she found that it was written by her father, who she had no awareness of, her heart instantly raced.

The sender was Mamoru Yoshikuni…

(This person's my papa?)

What kind of person is he?

Maybe I will be able to meet him.

Harboring such hopes, she searched the name on the cellphone internet, only to be met with startling news.

Mamoru Yoshikuni was a criminal.

He had pleaded innocence, but nobody believed him.Soon after, he stood at the edge of the platform, and was killed because he did not notice the incoming train. Others had claimed that he committed suicide…

All sorts of thoughts filled her mind, robbing her of her breath.

Some claimed that Kuze's alibi was forged, and some claimed that Kuze was the one who instructed Yoshikuni to cover the incident up. It was revealed that Yoshikuni received bribes--There were all kinds of speculations on the internet, and they caused Shioriko to falter.

At that point, Kuze continued to smile on the television as a famed philanthropist.

Shioriko wondered if her father was fooled by Kuze, just as the internet speculation had stated, and was made the scapegoat. This suspicion soon became firm belief.

Grandpa lost the house because he bore the debt for a friend. Papa must be like him too; he died because he was too kind!

--Grandpa, Hikaru, both of you are so weird; why can you forgive others so easily? It's because of that that you're tricked, toyed, and slandered by others--all the bad things happen to you!

She was unable to vent the turbulent emotions roaring within her, and could only take it out on Hikaru as she slammed his chest over and over again.

Hikaru practically embraced Shioriko for the entire night.

The next day, Shioriko was unable to look at Hikaru due to awkwardness, but the he merely smiled at her gently, saying 'Good morning'.

That warm smile was akin to her grandfather's, causing her to feel some form of solace.

If Hikaru was still alive, perhaps she would hide the contents of the letter deep within her heart.

However, he died, and Tomohiko had muddled her up with her deceased mother.

If she could get back her old house, perhaps her grandfather would get better.

For this cause, she needed money. Despite Hikaru's forbiddance, she continued to hunt sparrows; however, the savage dog that should be helping her got in her way, preventing her from achieving her means.

Feeling frustrated, she spotted the cover of the weekly magazine that contained conspiracy theories on the food poisoning case ten years ago.

She was practically tranced as she stood at the bookshop entrance, staring at the cover unflinchingly.

Kuze had such a massive company; surely he would be able to fork out 64 million yen.

Right, since Kuze was supposedly the bad guy who framed her father, there was nothing wrong for her to con Kuze's money.

It was revenge.

With this as her motive, she started investigations on him, and tried approaching him.

But at this time, Tomohiko fell ill.

"Grandpa! Grandpa!" Shioriko was shouting away in the ambulance.

She had no time to hesitate.

Perhaps Tomohiko would die the next day.

Back then, she received a call from Hikaru's, only to be told by a woman who claimed to be Hikaru's cousin the time and location of the funeral--perhaps one day, at any given moment, the hospital would call and say 'Your grandfather's dead'.

She writhed in anguish on the extra bed in the hospital ward, and got up to take her grassy green pochette. She took out the calling card, and dialled the number.

--I can meet your superior, and I can work together with him. However, since the 64 million Yen is something I wanted from Kuze, I want your superior to pay for it.

The other party requested for time to consider, and said that they would contact her again.

It was practically a deal with the devil, and she inadvertently felt fearful of it.

It was three days after her grandfather had fallen ill, in the middle of the night, when she received a reply.

The cellphone in her pocket vibrated, waking her up. She took it out, and found that it was that man.

There was only one line contained within that mail,

"We accept your request."

Once she saw this, Shioriko changed her clothes immediately, and left the Akagis with her pochette and Capybara plushie.

The outside was completely dark, and the air was frigid to the point of freezing.

She called, and the man picked up the phone. She endured her trembling, and haughtily requested,

--Send someone to pick me up.

And so, Shioriko and Gohara were accomplices.

Gohara was the senior managing director in Kuze's company, and had always plotted to topple Kuze's current position.

Shioriko felt he was an arrogant prick, a good-for-nothing. However, since he was willing to pay 64 million yen, she had nothing to complain about.

Gohara brought Shioriko to the television studio, and introduced her to the news people.

--Isn't it very miserable to see a pretty elementary school girl plead for her father's innocence?

However, their reactions were not as expected, for she was too cute. One would assume that the news was fabricated, and not everyone would agree with it. There had to be bigger topic if they wanted to brazenly report something while taking the risk of going up against Kuze.

"We thought of something."

Gohara explained his script; Shioriko was to barge into the charity meeting chaired by Kuze, with prominent political and economic figures in attendance, and face Kuze.

"If you create a commotion there, it'll ruin his image, and some might be willing to support you. In this case, the media will have to do something."

It's all up to you--

Gohara said with a hideous sneer.

At this point, Shioriko was standing in front of the villa with Gohara.

The doors opened right in front of her eyes.

The torches were all lit within, and Shioriko was dazzled by the lights in front of her.

"Mr Gohara? We've been waiting. Eh? This young lady is?"

The attendant in butler uniform asked,

"A special guest."

Gohara answered, and ushered Shioriko into the house as they scaled the red carpet staircase.

For every step they took, her gut was wrenched, and she was gradually finding it difficult to breathe.

It was scary.

Her legs were numb.

But she had to go on.

She suddenly recalled the amicable Akagis, probably out of fear, and as a result, was aching in misery.

(They were so nice to me, and even made such nice meals for me, bought this Capybara plushie for me, taught me to write calligraphy, slept with me, said bedtime stories to me…)

But if she were to stay, she would definitely weaken. She would then become hesitant and revert back to being a normal child!

That was why she had to leave that family immediately. She should have left that Capybara plushie.

(I can't become a weak kid!)

For grandpa.

And for papa,who showed such concern to mama in the letter.

Papa definitely must be a good guy, just like grandpa and Hikaru!

They were about to arrive at the doors leading to the meeting room.

Shioriko grabbed the green pochette dangling on her shoulder, took a deep breath, placed her hand on the icy door, and pushed it…

"……What's…...going on…?"

There were pots of orchids everywhere in this high-ceiling room.

There were orchids with narrow stems, orchids with long leaves and milky white orchids that were extremely glossy--each of them had a bewitching atmosphere to them as they gave off a sweet fragrance…

The window at the veranda was opened, and the moonlight should shine inside quietly.

In the middle was the director's table.

But there was only a person seated there, an old man with white hair, dressed in a posh kimono...

That man--Soichiro Kuze--was smiling gently at Shioriko.

"Good evening, young lady."

Shioriko felt goosebumps all over her, her enthusiasm dampened.

"A-Ad-Ad-Ad-Ad-Advisor!? Didn't you have a regular meeting for the charity organization today?"

Gohara, who was standing beside Shioriko, was completely pale.

Kuze showed a calm expression as he answered,

"The meeting was cancelled. Didn't the secretary notify you? Did you forget in the spur of the moment? That is careless of you."

"Please pardon me."

The man who helped Gohara contact Shioriko suddenly appeared at the door.

Gohara looked back, and once he saw that person, he was speechless.

Shioriko felt her heart skip a beat.

(This man is actually Kuze's spy…)

Behind the man were a group of men dressed in suits, probably the security personnel.

There was no escape!

Gohara's face was flushed with fear and fury.

Shioriko held onto the pochette with her right hand tightly, her body stiff as she bit her lips.

Kuze stood up.

"--!"

Shioriko cringed in fear as Kuze deliberately closed in on her slowly. He stopped in front of her, and showed a calm smile.

The fragrance of orchids had gently ensnared Shioriko's body.

"I'm sorry that you had to make a trip tonight, but it is easier to talk when there are fewer people around. Gohara, would you mind leaving this place for the time being?"

"Director, this way please."

"L-Let go of me, you traitor!"

Gohara's voice gradually trailed off,and the moment the doors were shut with a poignant boom, she found herself a little giddy.

"Alright. It's just between you and me now, so say whatever you want. Oh yes, I promised to treat you to whatever you like. What would you like me to serve you with? Is there anything you want to eat?"

Kuze sounded ever so calm as he spoke.

At that time, Shioriko felt a frail hand, dripping in poison, tickling her heart.

(Kuze saw through everything. He already set everything up!)

The despicable man she wanted to take revenge on was toying her, and this certain thought shook her greatly.

"Why aren't you answering? You're not hungry? Well, you may eat later. Would you please show me the evidence you have however?"

Shioriko held onto the edge of the green pochette as she retreated back.

"Y-You...you ordered papa to cover up the scandal, and made him bear all the blame! I know everything!"

"Is the father you're talking about Mamoru Yoshikuni? I never thought that he would have such a beautiful daughter. It certainly was reckless of him to do that."

Kuze's eyes were filled with empathy, his expression anguished. One could not tell if it was either an act, or truly his thoughts.

"Yoshikuni certainly was a rare honest man. His only hobby is to go fishing on vacations, and will never indulge himself in luxury. Perhaps it was because of his serious personality that he personally decided to cover up the incident for the sake of the company. It really hurts my heart to think about that. Perhaps the reason why he would say that I, as the CEO instigated him to do so is that I would do certain things 'if I were around', and that he misunderstood that I was hinting for him to cover up the matter. But if I were present, there's definitely no way I would allow him to do so."

Kuze sighed long and hard, seemingly feeling responsible for Yoshikuni's actions. This attitude of his rattled Shioriko.

"Even till now, I can't believe that Yoshikuni accepted corporate bribes. However, there were unnatural transactions recorded on his account...no matter how he tried to proclaim his innocence, no matter how I trusted him, I can't acquit him of his crime. Yoshikuni probably could not take the scrutiny from the public and the police, I guess. His parents died early, so I had to take care of the funeral...it was a real pity...there was no need for him to take his life."

He showed his philanthropic face as he said such words.

Both Tomohiko and Hikaru would smile, and would never raise their voice to scold. No matter how unreasonable matters were, they would accept them calmly.

Though Kuze's smile was similar to them, there were marked differences.

"If Yoshikuni really gave evidence that can prove his innocence to your mother, please let me show it. Come, let me confirm it with you."

Kuze spoke with a sweet orchid-like voice, and Shioriko shivered in fear in the face of the frail white hand that reached out at her, unable to say anything. Her legs were quivering as she held onto the green pochette tightly.

"Oh? You put it inside?"

Kuze grabbed the pochette.

"Ah…!"

The strap was snapped, and Kuze snatched the pochette away.

He pulled the zip, and took out an old folded letter. The post date was on July 20th, from Hamada. The recipient was a 'Midoriko Wakagi', while the sender was 'Mamoru Yoshikuni'.

He opened the letter, and read it.

Though frowning at first, his expression gradually relaxed, and he broke into cackles.

"This is just a letter to your mother. 'It's still hot today. Are you feeling already? I'll go meet father after that, telling her that you're pregnant and plead for his approval. I suppose it's better to get registered, so please take care of yourself and give birth to a healthy child'. Since he knew he has a child, what else is there to worry?"

Shioriko was flustered and furious, seething red.

As Kuze had said, it was a letter of concern for her mother.

There was nothing inside it that could prove his innocence.

It was because Shioriko read this letter that she believed her father was innocent.

That was why she believed he was a good man.

This letter was 'evidence', proving that he truly loved her mother, and proved that both were hoping to be her parents.

Kuze however viewed this talisman, which Shioriko kept with her at all times, as nothing, and even laughed at her.

She was unable to argue back; she had nary a weapon, and was practically empty-handed in front of her enemy.

"Alright now, young lady. It is a crime to try and threaten me with nothing and try to tarnish my name."

He coldly stated, and then showed a warm smile again.

"Well, it is useless to say such a thing to you. A young girl like you can't possibly come up with such a plan. Certainly, a bad man must have ordered you to do so, right? Will you please tell that name to the police? You can admit that you're simply a victim."

Kuze's objective was simply to get rid of Gohara, who opposed him.

For this, he had to pull Shioriko to his side.

Shioriko felt her body ostensibly being twisted once she understood Kuze's intent.

Everything had gone according to Kuze's plan.

She was a mere weak child!

"Are you willing to say so?"

Shioriko naturally did not want this man to get what he wanted. She clasped her hands tightly, bit her lips, and lowered her head, remaining silent.

"Oh? You don't wish to say so? In that case, I will have to hand you over to the police as a criminal."

That gentle voice ensnared Shioriko's neck like a snake, and she closed her eyes and mouth tightly as if suffocating. She struggled like a person drowning in water.

(Hikaru, save me…)

No matter how she begged, Hikaru was no longer alive. He could no longer embrace Shioriko, and could no longer comfort her in her restlessness.

At this moment…

"I'll choke you to death if you dare do that!"

A passionate voice rang from a window at a corner of the veranda.

Shioriko lifted her head, and found a fiery-looking, tall lanky youth leap in through the window, his red hair swaying with the wind.

"!"

He was huffing and puffing like a dog barking madly, his dirty, soil-riddled sneakers stepping upon the thin carpet.

Kuze whipped out a cellphone from the inside of his kimono, intending to call for security.

The savage dog Hikaru gave--Koremitsu Akagi widened his eyes, and in what seemed like an attempt to stop him, roared,

"Shiiko's your own daughter!"

◇◇◇

She had no idea what Koremitsu meant when she said that.

That was the expression Shioriko had when she stared at Koremitsu

Koremitsu felt his heart being carved apart as he thought of the truth that would be revealed.

(I can't believe it either! Shiiko is Kuze's own daughter!?)

Asai told Koremitsu the original location of the meeting, that the charity organization's regular meeting which Kuze chaired was suddenly delayed.

"Figure out the rest with that slow-witted mind of yourself", she said these words.

Whilst Koremitsu dashed towards the place, Hikaru spoke with a serious look,

"Shiiko fell into a trap."

Hikaru even stated that it was likely Shioriko's father was not Mamoru Yoshikuni, but Kuze.

(This is too tragic to Shiiko, but Koremitsu, you still want her to know despite knowing that, right?)

Kuze had his cellphone by his ear as he remained speechless. Hikaru glared at him sternly, and stated poignantly,

"Shiiko's mother was an idol affiliated to a certain famous agency, and had yet to make her debut."

And so, Koremitsu said to both Kuze and Shioriko,

"Shiiko's mom was an idol belonging to a famous agency, and did not make her debut back then."

Surely, Kuze had yet to realize who Shioriko's mother was.

And so, he frowned slightly.

"She became an acquaintance with you, when you were a major sponsor. And then, you had an affair with this girl, whose age was young enough to be your daughter, or even your granddaughter."

"At that time, you met her mother as a sponsor, but you had a relationship with her when she was still very young, and made her pregnant. As a result, she was fired from the agency."

Shioriko widened her eyes, her face pale as she listened to Koremitsu. Her eyes were

filled with confusion and conflicting emotions.

(I'll tell you every truth Hikaru said, Shiiko. I know this will make you sad, but listen to everything and have a new life from now on. I'll try my best to help you then.)

Koremitsu endured the anguish as he looked forward. Kuze, who finally recovered from his shock, calmly rebutted,

"What nonsense are you spouting? That child's father is Mamoru Yoshikuni. You see? It's what the letter stated."

After saying that, he raised the letter with a smile on his face.

Hikaru immediately continued,

"Mr Yoshikuni stated in the letter that he wanted to ask his father for approval but you just said that his parents died early. His father is no longer alive! Who's he going to ask for approval?"

Koremitsu snatched the letter and envelope from Kuze's hands.

Kuze flinched, and pulled his hand back like he was bitten.

"This letter contains something about 'asking father for approval'. You just said that Yoshikuni had no relatives to conduct his funeral! I heard it all on the veranda!"

Koremitsu handed the letter to Shioriko, and closed in on Kuze with a ferocious look, causing the latter to retreat in fear.

"Was he going to ask his father at his grave?"

"Who knows. He would not be able to get his father's approval either way, and if the family registration will not happen, why would he do that?"

Hikaru's eyes looked sharper than before, like a lake absorbing the moonlight.

Shioriko pressed the letter tightly to her chest, her expression faltering uneasily.

"If it had not been Mr Yoshikuni's child, but his superior's, which would mean you in this case...Shiiko's mom could not talk to you, and had to discuss matters with Mr Yoshikuni. That makes sense! When Shiiko's grandfather was talking about the child in the tummy, he once said, 'should be somewhere in the Spring hall, feeding the bruins, travelling in the Silver World...carrying the sword of Seto around, watching the pitiful crickets'--"

Hikaru prattled on, and Koremitsu pricked his ears as he was worried about missing out on anything, and passionately said,

"She can't be registered if he doesn't get the permission from his dead father? If this 'father' means someone else, it'll be more natural to think that Shiiko's mom looked to Yoshikuni for help. Shiiko's grandfather once said, 'Shiiko's father should be somewhere in the Spring hall, feeding the bruins, travelling in the Silver World, carrying the sword of Seto around, watching the pitiful crickets'--"

Kuze frowned.

"Spring hall…"

"The Spring Hall is a type of Neofinetia falcata orchids! Bear, silver world, seto sword, crickets, they all are! Shiiko's grandfather already knew that her father is you, the king of orchids!"

Hikaru spoke sternly,

And Koremitsu roared,

"These are all species of Neofinetia falcatas. Orchids! What Shiiko's grandfather wanted to say is that her father is often living amongst them! That person is not Yoshikuni, but you, the king of orchids! Kuze!"

Kuze was unable to smile anymore.

There was intense shock and confusion on his face, but his dry lips twitched slightly as it seemed he wanted to struggle on.

Hikaru then turned his head to Shioriko.

"Shiiko, what is your mother's name?"

"Shiiko, say your mom's name."

Shioriko, who had been listening intently with bated breath, lowered her eyebrows, looking completely confused.

Her shoulders were shuddering as she stared at Koremitsu, and hoarsely replied,

"Midoriko...Wakagi. Her stage name is Riko…"

"!"

Kuze's expression clearly changed.

His eyes were wide, his face completely tense as he stared at her.

Hikaru then stated his final line calmly,

"If you do not believe it, please do a DNA test."

And Koremitsu said coldly,

"If you have any doubts about it, go do a DNA test."

But this line was unnecessary to Kuze. He no longer had Koremitsu in his sights, let alone Hikaru.

He stared at Shioriko intently, ostensibly wanting to devour her as he tried to find any form of semblance in her, in her eyes, mouth, nose, dangling black hair.

"You're Riko's child...really…"

A dry voice stammered.

Shioriko clutched the letter to her chest as she cringed tentatively, remaining still.

The man she thought was her father was not her father, and the man who she thought was the culprit was her real father.

Would she be able to accept this truth?

Hikaru stared at Shioriko in grief; perhaps he had known who her real father was once he heard her grandfather mention the names of the orchids.

That was why, when they went to Shioriko's house, he said in frustration that it would not be good no matter whether Shioriko succeeded in her plan.

Koremitsu wondered whether Hikaru would have kept this matter to himself if the situation had not played out like this.

Just as Shioriko's grandfather, Tomohiko, had done for the past ten years.

Koremitsu clearly sensed her fear, distress, and confusion. He was as grieved as she was.

Kuze too was shocked by this, but had no choice but to recognize this fact. He showed a feeble expression belonging to a normal old man as he reached his hand towards her, wanting to stroke her milky-white face.

Shioriko shivered, but was unable to move as she stared anxiously and fearfully at the man she realized was her father.

Right when the old man and young girl--father and daughter, exchanged fearful looks…

The cellphone in Koremitsu's pocket rang.

Koremitsu secretly grumbled the inopportune moment of the call, but was stupefied once he saw the screen.

It was from the hospital.

Koremitsu's heart was pounding furiously.

He pressed the dial button, brought the phone to his ear, and was greeted with a dysphoric message.

Shioriko's grandfather had passed away.

Chapter 7 - The Savage Dog Protecting You

--Shiiko, the Summer Camellias have bloomed.

That was Tomohiko's final line.

Tomohiko probably was back to how he was before when he said this with a gentle smile, for he mentioned viewing the blooming white flowers with his granddaughter, and not his daughter.

Upon hearing this description by the nurse, Shioriko bit her lips, looking ever so remorseful.

What was she regretting about?

Was it about not seeing her grandfather in his last moments?

Or was she regretting fighting for his sake.

The funeral was simple.

Masakaze and Koharu were in-charge of handling all the preparations.

Masakaze was very begrudging against women, and Koharu had a strong distrust of men. Though their relationship was usually poor, they still worked together in such moments and went about doing things quietly.

Both Koremitsu and Hikaru stood by Shioriko.

Shioriko never said a single thing throughout the funeral as her hands remained limp on her thighs, her eyes hollow as she looked down.

Kuze too attended the funeral.

He proposed to take Shioriko in, and Masakaze answered that it would be for her to

decide.

"Please come with me." Kuze said with a fragile look, and Shioriko, dressed in a simple black one-piece, remained silent as her eyes remained lifeless.

"..."

She however nodded slightly.

Most likely, Masakaze was worried that Shioriko would not accept his proposal, and so he looked relieved once he saw her reaction.

However, both Koremitsu and Hikaru looked on with heavy hearts, looking hesitant on whether to speak out or not.

Two days later.

Kuze chose a cute laced blouse and skirt for Shioriko, and the latter changed into it obediently, carried her Capybara plushie, and bowed deeply, saying,

"Thank you for your hospitality."

She then turned to Koremitsu, and frowned slightly.

"...Bye bye."

Once she whispered this, she sat on the car Kuze sent over, and left.

Koremitsu, Hikaru, Masakaze and Koharu remained in front of their house, and looked in the direction Shioriko left until the car had disappeared.

"Right...time to wash the clothes."

"I need to do some writings I was requested to do."

"I need to go to school."

"Koremitsu, you're wearing your left and right socks wrongly."

Everyone began to move off awkwardly, ready to do their things.

Koremitsu clicked his tongue, wore his socks correctly, and left for school.

(It's not like I won't see Shiiko again.)

He knew where she lived, and could visit her anytime. If she was in trouble, he could still help her.

But no matter how Koremitsu tried to console himself, he was unable to cheer up.

Hikaru too was unable to cheer up after all…

(He's most probably thinking of the same thing as me.)

However, both of them could not say what they were thinking, and it was likely they were both distressed.

Koremitsu removed his shoes in front of the shoe locker, and suddenly, someone tapped him on the shoulder from behind.

"Morning Akagi!"

He looked back, and found Honoka staring at him cheerfully.

"...Morning."

"Shiiko's returning to her father today, right? It's great that she can live with her family."

Koremitsu had already notified Honoka, Aoi and Hiina through the cellphone, since they had helped him search for Shioriko. He told them that Shioriko's grandfather had passed away, that he would take absence for the time being, and that she would live with her father.

(They probably won't be staying with each other...but she has nobody other than Kuze as family…)

But Koremitsu was unable to say this as he saw Honoka looking happy that Shioriko was living with her father.

Kuze had bowed formally to Masakaze, thanking him for taking care of his daughter,

and had vowed to be a good father.

"The best thing children can have are their parents."

"Miss Shikibu's right."

Hiina suddenly interjected between Koremitsu and Honoka.

"The best thing is to live in a family. A family is a precious treasure!"

She grinned as she spoke with certainty.

"...I guess."

Koremitsu turned away from the pair and hissed this as he walked down the corridor.

"...Yeah."

Hikaru too chimed in lifelessly.

"It is really great that Shiiko can be with her father."

"...Right, I, guess."

While both of them plodded on with gloomy looks,

"Congratulations."

Asai Saiga stood in Koremitsu's way.

She seemed extremely furious, her temples practically bulging as she glared at Koremitsu with acrimony.

Standing beside her was Aoi, who tried to pacify,

"Please do not do this, Asa."

She was tugging at Asai's arm, but the latter was contentious as she said,

"It certainly was shallow of you to casually say 'it's great that she can be with her

father'.That father of hers has other family members; if he brings a mistress' child in, it will ruin his image. He can only give her monthly pocket money and not admit to their relationship. He will send the child to a boarding school overseas, and will not intend to carry out his duties as a father! What happiness is there for the child!? You really are an imbecile!"

Koremitsu was speechless.

He never expected Asai, always so aloof and calculative, to lambast him so loudly, so agitatedly. What she said too…

(Shiiko will be sent to a boarding school!? I never heard of that! And if he's not going to admit their relationship…)

No, he could certainly realize if he thought of it. Kuze had a wife, children, and even grandchildren; on top of that, he had fame and prestige. How could he ever admit that he had an illegitimate daughter still studying in elementary school, let alone the fact that her mother gave birth to her at the age of 15?

For Kuze, Shioriko was a stain that was not to be revealed to the world…

(But Kuze personally visited us, and asked us to hand Shiiko over to him. It looks like he really likes her; Shiiko also didn't refuse, so I…)

Hikaru was completely aghast.

"Of course she's happy."

Hiina suddenly interrupted, sounding confident as if it was a matter of fact, and continued,

"That father must have sent her to the boarding school for her sake. That's why the daughter will be happy to accept the father's decision."

Asai looked at Hiina with disdain.

Feeling apprehensive as she was not too certain on the situation, Honoka stared at Asai, Hiina and Koremitsu in turn.

Hiina's words caused Koremitsu to be rattled for a second time.

(For Shiiko's sake? It's true that it's better to send her to live leisurely at a boarding school rather than let her be ostracized for being an illegitimate kid.)

Did Kuze protect Shiiko in his own way?

Does he truly love Shiiko enough, and made sure that she's not lonely?

Most importantly, is Shiiko happy?

Koremitsu did not know the correct answer; his heart was pounding wildly, his brains nearly exploding.

At this moment, Aoi slowly spoke up,

"I feel Shiiko...is like Hikaru."

Koremitsu was startled.

"Hikaru too...his mother died when he was young, and he was brought into the Mikados…"

Hikaru shivered, and stared at Aoi.

There was a tinge of sorrow in his eyes, and his eyebrows slowly fell.

His expression reminded Koremitsu of Shioriko as she left.

Back then, she frowned as she quietly bid farewell in a lonely manner.

--*Bye bye.*

There was also the hollow expression she showed at Tomohiko's funeral.

Her eyes were red and swollen back at Hikaru's funeral, and she was sobbing away, clenching her fists.

She looked completely dazed as she nodded when Kuze requested to take her away.

She glared at Koremitsu, resisting the urge to cry as she shouted 'don't treat me as a kid'

She was sobbing and snivelling as she leaned onto Koremitsu's neck when they were sleeping together.

And she had a stoic expression on her face when the vehicle fetching her had arrived.

--I did not want Shiiko to turn into a child who cannot cry.

(Right! Shiiko never cried since the moment her grandfather died!)

Asai was right, he really was a fool.

He only realized it now!

Koremitsu gritted his teeth, and clenched his fists. His head was sizzling to a point of numbness.

"Shikibu."

"Eh! Eh? Yes!"

Honoka was shocked to be called so suddenly.

"Tell the teacher that I'm leaving early."

Aoi and Hiina widened their eyes.

Koremitsu then said to Asai in disdain,

"...Thanks."

He then walked to the shoe locker.

(I actually owe this damn annoying woman two favors.)

"Wait! Akagi! What do you mean you're going off early!? You just arrived at school!"

Koremitsu ignored Honoka's holler as he continued to change his footwear, and

walked out the school entrance whilst the morning sun shone brightly.

Upon seeing Koremitsu head the other way, the students arriving at school were intimidated by his raised eyebrows, stiff facial muscles and fiery glare, prompting to part and make way.

As Koremitsu strode forth, he asked the friend behind him,

"What do you say, Hikaru?"

He could sense a bewildered breath from behind him, followed by a hesitant voice,

"...I did feel that Shiiko currently needs a guardian. Since Mr Soichiro does seem to dote on Shiiko, and since she did not refuse, I really had no reason to object. It is not a bad thing for Mr Soichiro, who is wealthy and influential, to take care of her."

(We're thinking of the same things, worried about the same things.)

"But when Asa said congratulations...I felt really shocked."

(Yeah. That woman's words were like a sucker punch onto my face.)

"I felt heartbroken when Miss Aoi said that Shiiko is like me."

(Yeah. I realized when I heard Aoi say that.)

Koremitsu's pace hastened as he glared at the school gates in the front, and he yelled,

"Say, what do you want, Hikaru!? Don't tell me that you're already dead or that you don't want to cause trouble for me and my family or what Shiiko feels…I'm asking you 'what do you think'!!!"

I've decided.

So Hikaru, tell me now!

A passionate voice rang.

"I do not want to hand Shiiko over to Kuze!"

"You really like to dilly-dally! Why do you think I want to hear your voice!? Don't keep your troubles hidden inside! Just tell me all the important stuff!"

And then, he puffed his chest.

"Leave it to me!"

He sprinted with all his might.

◇◇◇

Shioriko stared blankly out of the window.

"It's about time for us to leave."

Kuze prompted her gently.

In a while, Shioriko would be lodging in her new school.

"The new school is a good place with natural beauty everywhere."

Kuze walked towards the corridor as he was seemingly comforting Shioriko, who listened in silence.

Kuze had been kind to her ever since he learnt that she was her daughter.

"Maybe you won't think of me as your father immediately, but I'll take care of you nicely as my daughter."

Kuze once tested Shioriko's response back when she was with the Akagis.

He gave her a cute blouse and skirt that were laced, shoes, and all the daily commodities he prepared for her were all quality, high-end products.

However, the clothes, towel and pencil case she originally had were thrown away.

The pencil case was a birthday present Tomohiko bought for her the previous year, and she had always treasured it.

Even though it was thrown away, she was not angry, for her mind had become completely blank

She always thought of her amiable, kind-hearted grandfather, who always had a smile on his face. As she grew up with her grandfather, she felt that her grandfather needed her; thus, she had to protect him.

She was adamant in earning back her grandfather's house.

But he was dead.

He was unable to say his final farewells.

It felt surreal seeing him lying on the bed with a white cloth…

From that moment on, Shioriko felt as if she was on a separate plane from reality, feeling as if the transpired events was simply something she witnessed on television.

No matter how Kuze tried to be kind to her, or decided to send her to boarding school, she never expressed a single opinion.

Kuze felt the Capybara plushie Koremitsu's grandfather bought was too childish, and snatched it away the instant they reached home, stuffing it into a box.

She had no idea whether it would be delivered to the boarding school.

The letter from Mamoru Yoshikuni, which she had been keeping as a talisman, remained folded in her pocket, hidden within.

Though she knew Yoshikuni was not her real father, she was unable to let go of this letter of concern to her mother.

"What's the matter? You seem out of sorts. Are you afraid of living in a boarding school? It's fine. I'll look for you during the holidays. You can also stay in this apartment when you come back from Tokyo."

Kuze said with a smile.

--It's fine.

That was what her grandfather always said.

He would always such words to a miffed Shioriko with a gentle smile, whether it was when the umbrella he left in the Go club vanished mysteriously, causing him to be completely drenched, when the persimmons were eaten by the crows, or when he lent all the notes in his wallet to a needy friend.

When grandfather was hospitalized, Shioriko was extremely distressed, and Hikaru too spoke to her with a sweet gentle voice,

--It is alright, Shiiko.

Every night, he would kiss her on the cheek and neck.

Shioriko always felt that her grandfather and Hikaru were too kind, that they did not understand the perils of the world, that they were not strong enough to be her support.

Thus, she told Hikaru that she wanted a fierce, loyal, savage-looking dog.

If she could ever have such a dog, she could chase the creditors away, and she could use him to teach the bad guys a lesson..

Hikaru narrowed his pretty eyes and gently stated,

--I'll get you a good dog who can protect you, one you can rely on...

Hikaru promised.

--I'll put him in the house that is to be kept for you. You will come by often to meet him, right?

Shioriko understood very well that Hikaru gave her an excuse so that she would go back to that house.

But she thought that it would be a wonderful life to raise such a dog in her beloved garden with Hikaru, laughing away as they watch her grandfather do his gardening.

Soon after however, Hikaru drowned in a river…

Depressed and distressed, she bawled her heart out at the funeral.

There was no way he could fulfill his promise to give her a dog.

However, Koremitsu appeared.

This red-haired boy had a black dog collar, looked extremely ferocious, and though lanky, looked very strong, and matched all the criteria for the 'dog' she wanted.

She thought that it was the 'dog' Hikaru gave.

But this dog would not listen to her orders at all, and would retort back no matter how she scolded it. 'Argh, I don't want such a stupid dog', she would think at times.

(Kor…)

She never called his name once before.

She always treated him as a watchdog, and it would be too embarrassing to call him by his actual name.

(...mitsu)

But why was she thinking only about his name, that terrifying ever-angry face of his, that baritone voice?

--Alright. Let's do calligraphy. Try writing something. Anything you think of.

--Don't toy with other people's hearts like that! Kids should go back home and do their homework once they're done with school! You damned brat!

--I'll be your dog until you grow up.

Koremitsu had been frowning all the time, curling his lips as he watched her from the moment Shioriko decided to leave with Kuze, when she bade farewell to the Akagis and rode on the car that came to pick her up.

(Why show such an expression?)

(What can I do? I can't stay at your house forever right? Kuze's my only family left.)

Shioriko was already a 4th grader, and yet she understood the situation.

She just wanted to protect her grandfather, but in fact, it was the other way around.

She was still a weak child. She could not stay alone in that apartment, let alone buy back the house by herself.

She knew all that clearly.

The sunlight outside the apartment was strong, sizzling to a point of dizziness.

A black sedan was parked at the entrance.

The chauffeur opened the door respectfully, and both Shioriko and Kuze got on.

(There's nothing else I can do…)

(I'm just a kid.)

(I can only obey the adults.)

The car soon moved off slowly.

The image of Koremitsu curling his lips gradually faded away. Even the sound of Kuze speaking beside her felt distant.

It felt as if they were talking to her from another planet…

She was trembling due to her heartache; her heart was completely empty, and it seemed she was stepping on the brakes, telling herself not to think too much

(I felt very hollow too when grandpa died, I didn't shed a single tear. I cried so hard at Hikaru's funeral...will I ever cry again?)

The sweat seeping from her neck and back cooled, and her fingertips and toes were becoming icy.

Suddenly, the vehicle stopped.

Shioriko fell forward, and nearly knocked into the front seat.

"Wha-what's going on!?"

Kuze, who also fell forward, yelled,

"Someone suddenly barged in!"

The chauffeur said anxiously.

There was a youth, carrying a school bag, standing in front of the windshield, dressed in short-sleeve shirt and uniform pants, wheezing as he stood in the middle of the road.

The blazing red hair fluttered in the wind, and the savage dog-like glare was piercing the car.

Suddenly, the door lock was opened.

"You mustn't! Shioriko!"

Kuze wanted to stop her, but she opened the door and poked her upper body outside.

She stepped onto the ground, and Kuze grabbed her left arm.

"You mustn't go, Shioriko!"

Kuze harshly said.

At this moment, Koremitsu yelled,

"Shiiko!"

Her body shivered.

"Come here Shiiko! I'll take care of you until you become a real woman! I'll protect you...in Hikaru's stead!"

The red hair swayed in the sweltering wind, covering the forehead. Below it, a pair of blazing eyes were staring right at her.

The promise she made with Hikaru…

All emotions surged within her heart, causing her dried eyes to be moist with tears, blurring her vision.

She recalled Hikaru's voice.

--I am going to give you a fierce dog. When I am not around, he can protect you in my place, and you will not feel lonely again.

Hikaru gave a refreshing smile as he pointed his pinky at her.

He gave Shioriko a savage-looking, ferocious yet loyal dog with bloody red hair.

--This dog will improve our bond, so I have to choose carefully.

--Just tell me any requests you have, Shiiko. Fawn over me all your want. You're the one I dote on most.

--You will become a fine and proper lady in the future, Shiiko. Before then, will you allow me to take care of you and meddle in your affairs?

--To my cute Shiiko, once Golden Week ends, let us go choose a dog I promised.

I want to give you the best dog.

I want to give you a dog that will strengthen our bond.

A reliable, loyal dog that can protect you.

--It is a promise, Shiiko.

That was the last pinky swear they made.

Shioriko recalled Hikaru's voice, and then recalled the words her grandfather would often say with a sagely face.

--Shiiko, people will lose certain things, and will gain certain things back.

The two people supporting Shioriko were her most beloved, and had been pushing her on with gentle smiles.

The dog Hikaru promised her--Koremitsu--reached his arm out to her as his red hair fluttered.

Shioriko pushed Kuze's hand aside and immediately sprinted forward.

"Shioriko!"

Kuze called for her.

She ran into Koremitsu's chest and climbed upon the sturdy chest giving off a feral smell, tears flowing down her eyes.

"Koremitsu! Koremitsu!"

She called over and over again.

Tears flowed over and over again, drenching Koremitsu's shirt, but she could not stop. She again called his name over and over again, as if checking if it was really him.

Koremitsu! Koremitsu! Koremitsu!

Koremitsu too embraced Shioriko.

"Is this really okay, Shiiko?"

He asked unhappily, sounding rather clumsy,

Shioriko shook her head hard, and answered,

"I-I want to be with you!"

His shirt was completely drenched, and it was all wrinkled as Shioriko was grabbing onto it.

At this moment, Kuze's voice came from behind.

"Please let go of my daughter."

Koremitsu continued to embrace Shioriko as he lifted his head.

Kuze was staring at him sternly.

(Humph...I knew things aren't going to be that easy.)

Both Koremitsu and Hikaru understood this well.

(But you've decided to bring Shiiko back right? Hikaru.)

He exchanged looks with Hikaru.

Of course. Hikaru's eyes were saying this, and he took a step forward.

"Let us make a deal, Mr Kuze. If you return Shiiko to us, we will not pursue the matter of Mamoru Yoshikuni."

The angelic pretty sidelong expression spoke in a clear voice.

And Koremitsu conveyed his words as they were.

"Let's make a deal. If you hand Shiiko to me, I won't press on regarding Mamoru Yoshikuni."

Kuze looked enraged.

"That again? You have no proof. Yoshikuni's letter only mentioned about the child."

Hikaru remained unperturbed as he continued,

"It is true that Mr Yoshikuni's innocence cannot be proven from the content of the letter. However, you forgot something; the mail address on the envelope."

"Have you carefully read the address on the envelope?"

The instant Koremitsu said this, Kuze frowned.

"Envelope?"

So what? He seemed to say.

Hikaru answered,

"The date on it was July 20 ten years ago, and the letter was sent from the post office in Hamada…"

"The date on it was July 20 ten years ago, sent from the Hamada City Post Office!"

Kuze gasped in shock.

He probably realized once he heard the date, and his face was completely frozen.

Hikaru continued without skipping a beat,

"The mass food poisoning incident Mr Yoshikuni tried to cover up ten years ago was regarding the marine day celebration in Shimane Prefecture. Currently, the festival is held on the 3rd Monday in July, but it was set on July 20th before the law was corrected in 2003. In other words, that day 10 years ago was the marine day, and it was sent on that day."

"The July 20th ten years ago was the Marine day, when the mass food poisoning happened. This was delivered into the Hamada City post box on the day of the event!"

Kuze sneered, and said,

"...Of course. Yoshikuni had instructed the people there to cover up the incident on the day of the event."

"Right, and on that day, 'you were eating with associates in a Tokyo restaurant."〞

"On that day, you were eating with associates in Tokyo, and you never took a step into the place of incident?"

"Of course. I had sufficient alibi."

Kuze stared at Koremitsu with a sharp look.

Shioriko seemed uneasy, and tugged harder at Koremitsu's sleeve.

Hikaru then continued,

"But the letter Mr Yoshikuni wrote clearly stated that he would meet the father, which means you."

"In Shiiko's letter, Yoshikuni wrote 'I'll meet the father immediately'. That father is you!"

Shioriko rummaged her pocket.

She opened the folded envelope, read through the address, and then opened the letter, reading it with a trembling voice,

"It's still hot today…Are you feeling already? I'll go meet father after this...telling her that you're pregnant and plead for his approval."

The teary face winced childishly, and the fingers holding onto the letter was shuddering.

She blinked, and the tears rolled down her cheeks. She gritted her teeth, and gave Kuze a chastising stare.

Kuze was speechless, sweat filling his forehead.

"Ten years ago, on July 20, you were not in Tokyo, but in Shimane, and you ordered Mr Yoshikuni to cover up the food poisoning scandal. This letter and address is the proof."

"You were at the scene of the incident on that day, you bastard. You even instructed Yoshikuni to cover up the mess, just as he had told the police. He was following your instructions back then, which means that the one lying wasn't Yoshikuni, but you Kuze!"

Koremitsu's bellow was as deafening as thunder.

Clearly, Mamoru Yoshikuni never told the police that he once wrote a letter to Shioriko's mother.

Perhaps he was worried that she would get involved, and with his superior pushing the blame onto him, the false alibi being validated, he felt that it would be useless to try and defend himself, and perhaps he was in despair.

He was last seen at the platform, knocked down by a passing train.

Nobody knew whether the cause was mental weakness due to excessive stress, or suicide.

But that letter showed a lot of things.

Mamoru Yoshikuni must have been a kind person.

And Kuze drove such a man to death. This notion caused Koremitsu to be completely infuriated.

(You hid yourself in a safe place and told your kind subordinate to bear all the blame, you bastard. Some philanthropist you are!)

Flames of rage were practically blazing from his eyes.

Even Kuze's own daughter was glaring at him furiously.

In the face of these furious looks, Kuze frowned, and insisted,

"Wh-What letter? You can make up as many of this as you want. That's not enough to be evidence!"

Hikaru calmly continued,

"Yes, but it is enough for the police to investigate the incident ten years ago again. Your company is undergoing a massive power struggle, do you think you can remain safe as you last did ten years ago? Maybe there would not be traitors like Gohara or tabloids on the weekly magazine ten years ago, but your influence is not as great as it was before. You will definitely lose if such shocking news is announced."

Hikaru stared at Kuze with pity for an old man who was trying his best to hide everything, but was gradually wilting away.

Koremitsu barked like a wild dog in his heart.

(I won't pity you! I'm not revealing these things because of you, but for Shiiko's sake! I won't forgive you! Until your death, I want you to know that people know about the bad things you did!)

"Even if it can't be used as proof, your enemies can use this letter to look into the incident ten years ago and topple you!"

Kuze paled, and frowned as he gritted his teeth.

After panting unbearably for a while…

"Shioriko, do you mind handing that letter over to papa?"

He spoke with a coaxing tone,

"Papa will become poor if the police catches me, and you won't have any pretty clothes to wear, no pretty house to live in. Papa can't bring you overseas or to posh restaurants to eat."

Shioriko however was no longer being the weak girl with a blank look on her face, as she reverted back to her feisty, courageous self that was willing to con adults. She leaned onto Koremitsu, holding that letter tightly.

"I don't need those things."

She glared at Kuze.

"I want to be with Koremitsu. Even if you give me a billion yen, I won't hand the letter to you This is a memento from papa. My papa's a good man!"

Hikaru smiled heartily.

The atmosphere around him was glowing, clearer than ever, as if the sun was shining all over him.

Koremitsu then said to the gobsmacked Kuze,

"Send all of Shiiko's luggage to my house."

He then placed his hands on Shioriko's shoulders, and turned away.

Hikaru and Koremitsu were standing side by side along Shioriko as they walked off.

"Erm, Ko-Koremitsu...is it really fine? An elementary schooler needs to spend a lot, right? Like nutritious lunches, travelling fees, textbook expenses...ah, I'll work hard to earn my own money so that you won't be troubled. I just need to catch ten sparrows every month…"

Koremitsu flicked a finger on her forehead, "Ouch!" she cried out with a teary face.

"You're not allowed to catch sparrows, damn it. I'll hang you off the ceiling if you dare do that."

"Koremitsu, what you said sounds like child abuse."

"Shut up, it's education."

"I didn't say anything...but really...about money…"

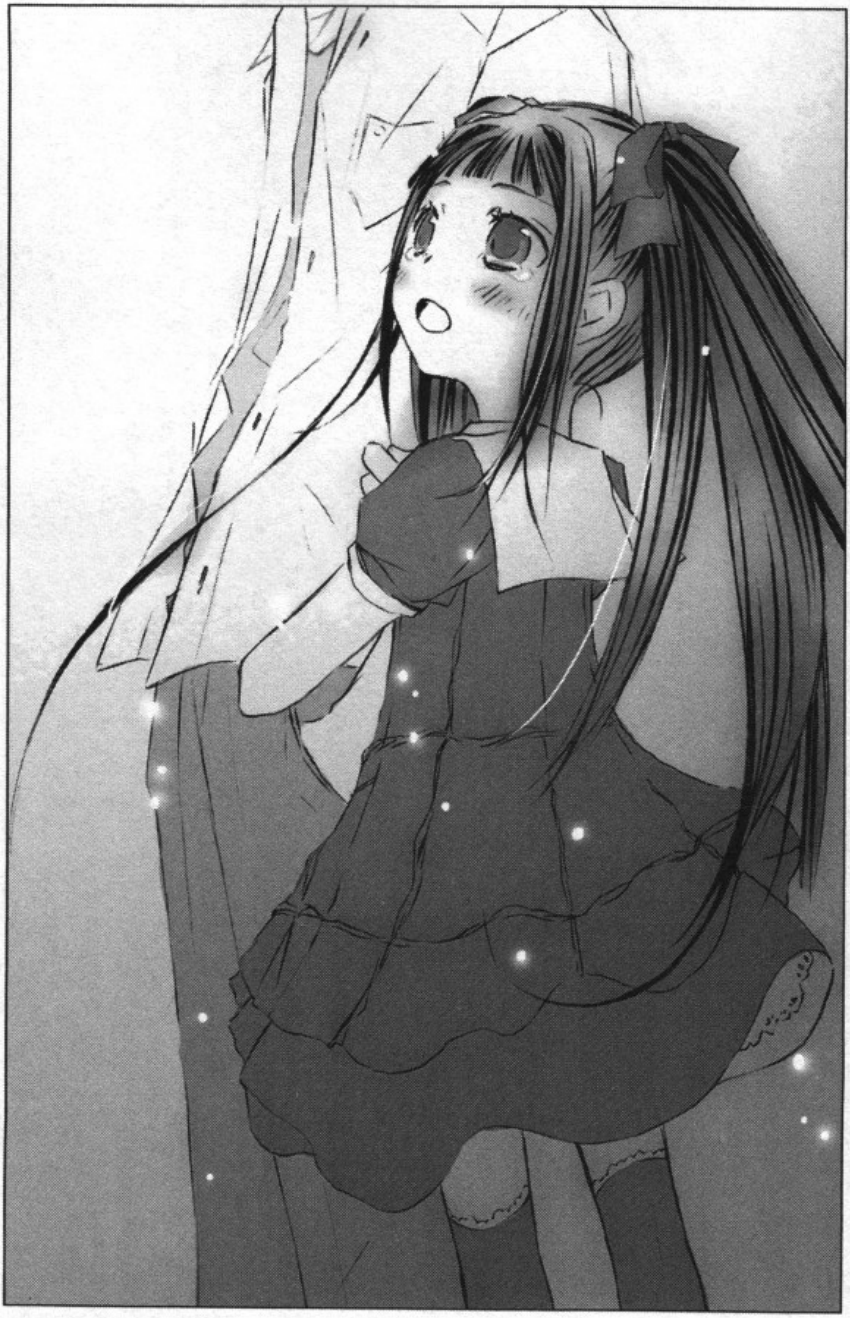
"There's a room in my house, and I can give some of my food to you. If there's a need for money, I'll go work. Didn't I say that I'll be a dog protecting you until you grow up? Don't worry about those things and be a brat."

Koremitsu's mother eloped and ran away from home when he was young, and his father died. Masakaze and Koharu did everything for him after that, and he did not know whether he, as a high schooler, would be able to do what they did. The actual situation had to be much worse than what he imagined.

But at the school gate, both Koremitsu and Hikaru had the same thoughts, and Koremitsu had his mind made up as he sprinted.

"Hikaru's my friend, and you're the Purple Gromwell he so treasures. I won't let you wilt."

With tears filling her eyes, she held onto Koremitsu's arm.



"I...wanted to say something to Hikaru when he was alive."

She spoke hoarsely as she lowered her head.

"But I couldn't say it. If only I was braver back then."

"Try saying it now. He'll definitely hear it."

Koremitsu looked at Hikaru as he patted a hand on Shioriko's head. Hikaru's gaze met his as he showed a beaming smile.

Shioriko lifted her head, her teary eyes facing the direction Koremitsu was looking at. After some silence, she snivelled, and earnestly whispered,

"Hikaru...thank you. I really love you most."

◊◊◊

It really is a pity that I died, Koremitsu.

If I lived on, maybe Shiiko would have married me.

Hm? You are asking me how many wives I want? This is not the Heian Era where one man could have many wives, that I have to watch myself?

I-I understand.Please do not glare at me angrily with such a seething look.

But Koremitsu.

When I imagine the possible things I could have done if I were alive, I would be really happy, excited.

How beautiful of a woman will this child become in five, ten years?

How tall will she become? How alluring will her body curves be like?

Her eyes, nose, mouth, how will they develop? What kind of a beautiful flower will she bloom into.

I definitely am not harboring any vile intents; this is simply delight and blissf over the maturation of a young seedling sprouting its leaves and imagining

what the colors and aroma of the flowers that will bloom in the future will be.

For I am 'someone who will never change'.

You say you do not understand? Anyone can change?

Well…

But I feel that there are some who will never change no matter how they struggle, how many times they met up and broke up with others.

Some people have their hearts lingering in a certain place in a past. No matter how they tried to break away, they end up returning there.

My time...had already ceased.

Like the prince who was unable to find that special flower.

I hope that I will never change, but I feel that my unchanging self is abnormal and lonely, like it was casted out from the world. I felt helpless, lonely, like pores being perforated in me.

Thus, I hope to be like the prince who gained solace in the ever changing Purple Gromwell. I feel really happy watching Shiiko's development, imagining her future.

Shiiko is my 'happiness'.

The time we spent together was refreshing, filled with surprise and new discoveries.

After I became a ghost, I became even more of 'an unchanging being'.

I hope that Shiiko will become a perfect, fine lady as she continues to grow.

She probably will remain hurt for a while since she lost someone important

to her.

But I am relaxed for you are with her.

She is a good child, but she is too independent, and will not rely on others. Sometimes, she can be verbally uncouth, she does have a foul streak, and she may anger you from time to time.

Sometimes, she will be downhearted, slamming your chest while crying, causing you to be at a loss of what to do.

In such situations, I hope that you can listen attentively to what she had to say.

And then, pat her on the head, tell her,

'It is alright'.

If someone near her can tell her this, she will definitely feel a lot more relieved.

And this will become more effective if it comes from you.

For you are a hero.

I am not saying this at random.

You did all the requests I made to you, no matter how tedious they were, and did them impressively.

Thank you for taking Shiiko away from Kuze.

Thank you for being the loyal dog protecting Shiiko.

Thank you for fulfilling my wish.

I am a worthless ghost who cannot help with even the task of moving houses…

But I am still on Earth, harboring unchanging love, protecting all of you as you change.

Epilogue - One of These Days

The moving of Shioriko's belongings finally ended on a bright Sunday.

The Akagis' guest room became Shioriko's.

Koremitsu mumbled and fumbled, sweating profusely as he explained how he took Shioriko away from Kuze to Masakaze and Koharu.

He told them that though Kuze was Shioriko's relative, he could not acknowledge her, and had to send her to a boarding school in the countryside, that Shioriko herself wished to stay with the Akagis.

He was mentally prepared for any refusals that might come. Kuze was Shioriko's father after all, and even if he could not acknowledge her, Koremitsu should not have broken their relationship apart.

But an unexpected event happened.

The news broadcast on the television reported that Kuze was requested by the police to cooperate in their investigations due to a bribery issue to a politician. Also, there was news that the politician was involved with Kuze's alibi in the mass food poisoning incident tenyears ago. Thus, all the media stations were investigating the truth of the matter.

Masakaze and Koharu assumed that Koremitsu's decision was based on this commotion, and allowed Shioriko to stay at the Akagis.

After Koremitsu said that he would work part-time to pay for Shioriko's food and school fees…

"What did you say!?"

"We're not so poor that you have to go out and work!"

He was immediately rebuffed.

Kuze did not ask anything, either due to being blackmailed by Koremitsu, or that he

was occupied by the media and police scrutiny.

"Hikaru, was the police investigation just a coincidence?"

Koremitsu asked, and Hikaru answered with a wise expression,

"Who knows? Mr Soichiro's influence had waned gradually over the years. Perhaps it was only a matter of fact that this happened."

"That's reaping what he sowed."

But ultimately, Kuze was still Shioriko's father, and Koremitsu was unable to be happy over this turn of events.

Shioriko too watched the news with conflicting emotions.

But after the luggage was shifted in, and the guest room became a child's bedroom, she still gave a cheery smile.

"You're no longer a guest now, so you have to do housework too. I'll just call you Shiiko instead of little Shiiko now."

"Okay, aunty Koharu."

"Play five-in-a-row against me later."

"Yes, grandpa Masakaze"

Shioriko got along amiably with Koharu and Masakaze.

And even Koremitsu…

"Thanks for coming to school with me, big brother Koremitsu "

The next morning,

Shioriko was standing at the elementary school gate, smiling as she carried the school bag on her back and a grassy green pochette.

It was still early, and no students could be seen in school.

She was not formally inducted into the school until the procedures were done, but Shioriko would be attending this school from this day onwards.

"I did the procedures along with aunt Koharu on Saturday. I know all the places, including the staff room, so it's alright. You're going to be late if you don't go to school, big brother."

"It's your first day at a new school. I'll accompany you."

"You still don't trust me? I said it's fine already."

Shioriko grumbled, but she was delighted that Koremitsu was showing her concern.

Big Brother--Koremitsu was not used to this honorific yet, and would blush whenever he heard this.

Hikaru beamed, and teased,

"Big brother Koremitsu here worries too much~ if you worry too much, Shiiko will say 'Big brother is so fussy'. Right? Big brother?"

(Don't you dare call me big brother! Are you doing it on purpose!?)

"Is that so? Well...give me a call immediately if something happens."

Koremitsu turned away, ignoring Hikaru. He sounded like a real big brother, and was about to leave,

"Eh, big brother."

Shioriko's wide eyes were looking up at Koremitsu.

"You said that you want me to become a real woman, so when I grow up you'll take my virginity in Hikaru's stead. It's a promise."

Koremitsu was flabbergasted as he heard this, and Shioriko cheekily grinned as she stuck a tongue up, shaking her green pochette and bag about as she ran into the sparkling school.

Is that a joke!? Or is that serious? It's bad if it's the latter!

"That's not what I meant when I said that--!!!"

Koremitsu hollered, and Hikaru, on standby by the side, hurriedly warned,

"Koremitsu, you must not! No matter how charming Shiiko is, you have to wait another five years...no, another twenty!"

"Why're you becoming a sane person out of a sudden!? Of course I have no intentions of doing that!"

"But the two of you are living under the same roof. Maybe one day you will suddenly be enticed with lust..."

"Don't talk as if I'm you!"

Koremitsu bickered with Hikaru as he went off to his school.

The African Lilies growing by the roadside were in bunches, giving off a sweet aroma from their irises.

Upon seeing these African Lilies, Hikaru, who was smiling just a while back, suddenly showed a tender hazy expression.

Who exactly was that beautiful woman, who shed tears to the same kind of flowers, who resembled Hikaru so much?

Why was Hikaru so anguished when he looked at her.

--Some who will never change no matter how they struggle, how many times they met up and broke up with others.

Koremitsu felt his heart ache as he recalled Hikaru saying this with a thin smile.

"Hey…"

He spoke softly to avoid others from hearing him.

"You say that you'll never ever change, but I don't think that's the case."

Hikaru widened his eyes slightly, and stared at Koremitsu.

Koremitsu lowered his head, and said unhappily,

"Even if you're dead, you're changing little by little. The same goes for me. I thought I would be treated as a terrifying delinquent for the rest of my life, and now I have friends, I have a cat, and an additional little sister. I would never have envisioned myself making such changes soon after I was hospitalized. Besides, isn't our relationship changing all the time? I understand you much better than when we first met on the corridor. I thought you were just an annoying handsome guy back then, and now I view you as my friend."

Damn, this sounds just like a confession!

His lowered face was seething as he suddenly lifted his head.

Once he saw that Hikaru was listening attentively, he felt his ears and face heat up, and raised his eyebrow.

"What do you mean by you'll never change? Aren't you being too thick-skinned here? Do you want to remain as a ghost forever? You've got to be kidding me."

He rubbed his nose as he said so. At this point, he was no longer concerned with the stares of the passers-by.

Hikaru widened his eyes.

Right. That day would come.

Until then, let's hope we'll continue to change.

Let's hope that we can continue to understand each other more.

The radiant smile on Hikaru's face was bubbling.

"Yeah. You always exceeded my understanding every single time. Perhaps I am changing because I was too shocked."

"I should be the one saying that."

Koremitsu retorted as he walked down the long dirt path.

He was a harem prince, a casanova, a martyr for women, and also a ghost…

Koremitsu met this troublesome being, became friends with him, and as he progressed into the new world day by day, his view of humans slowly changed.

He once thought Aoi was a gentle princess, but never expected her to be that decisive. Hiina Oumi of the newspaper club, who loved to cause ruckus everywhere, was unexpectedly fond of her family. The moment she saw what happened to Kuze on the news, she even commented with a serious look,

"No matter how many evil deeds he did, family's still family. If it were me, I would surely stay by my family."

And Asai Saiga, ever the thorn in Koremitsu's existence, spoke spitefully,

"You brought that girl home? It really is pitiful of her to live with a wild dog like you."

Hikaru however said,

"Asa may act like this, but she is really worried about Shiiko."

Koremitsu did not know whether those words were to be trusted...

And also--

Koremitsu suddenly spotted a pair of familiar slender legs walking in front, and sprinted to them, calling out,

"Yo, Shikibu."

"Wahh! Akagi…!"

Hikaru inadvertently chuckled upon seeing Honoka being so frantic.

"Miss Shikibu's response really is cute."

He commented.

Honoka's eyes were looking around.

"Eh, well, Shiiko moved to your house yesterday, right? Can I really say 'it's great' now?"

"Yeah."

Koremitsu answered, and Honoka finally relaxed her shoulders in relief. She then blushed, looking rather shy as she said,

"I don't really understand the situation like the Matriarch Asa and the rest, but I'm being such a busybody. I was worried...and I couldn't help much in the end. But it looks like you're fine now. That's great…"

She smiled as she lowered her head.

Koremitsu too felt cheerful, Honoka's embarrassed smile was seemingly seeping into his chest.

"Thanks Shikibu. You being with me was a great help already."

Honoka, upon hearing that, was boiling in embarrassment.

"Wh-What? Why're you saying such things!? I'll charge you consultation fees the next time! Don't just look for me whenever you need help! Really, y-yo-you, i-i-i-i-i-id-idiot!"

(I'm thanking you here. Why are you talking about consultation fees?)

Koremitsu looked completely confused, and Hikaru teased,

"From the looks of it, it seems you are still not sure as to why Miss Shikibu is being fidgety, aren't you? You still have lots to learn, Koremitsu."

Koremitsu glared at him,

Shut up, you noisy ghost. Koremitsu thought.

Honoka, who had been calling him an idiot up till this point, pouted, and said,

"E-Erm...about the pool…"

"Huh?"

"Are you really going to the pool with me once you're done?"

Her voice trailed off towards the end.

That embarrassed sidelong expression caused Koremitsu's heart to pound. He recalled Honoka's confession to him on the roof, and felt a ticklish sweet feeling inside him. He was blushing as he pondered over it, and answered,

"Sure."

"I-I'll be going then!"

Honoka had turned beetroot as she ran off with her skirt flustering. After running for some time, she suddenly stopped, and turned back with a blushing face. At this moment…

"Mr Akagi…!"

Aoi was panting as she ran towards Koremitsu.

Honoka gave her an intrigued look.

(Aoi…? What's it about?)

"Miss Aoi, the ribbon on your hair is loose."

Koremitsu, Hikaru and Honoka remained still as they watched Aoi show such an anxious look.

She suddenly stopped in front of Koremitsu, looked ready to burst into tears at any given moment, and said,

"Mr Akagi, please be my boyfriend!"

Footnote

I grew these blue-purple Lilies of the Nile as I reminisced about you.

The way their thin stems straightened in the bright moonlight really resembled you, and I kissed every single one of them.

The Lilies of the Nile are also known as African Lilies.

Their floral language is 'the most beloved'.

I really hope that I could groom you, my most beloved, lock you within a beautiful box, and hide you from everyone else.

And then, Hikaru…

I will never be able to see your betrayal.

Side Story - Asai Saiga's Holiday, and also, Hiina Oumi's Mumbling to Herself

Every month, Asai would spend a day amidst the 'tear-jerker' genre.

She would head to a movie or drama that was critically acclaimed to 'cause tears', prepare lots of novels and picture books with taglines like 'tear-inducing' and 'millions have shed tears over this', and would spend an entire night reading them.

During the weekend, she went early to a cinema with the intent to watch a foreign movie, the theme being 'friendship between man and dog, kinship, a riveting work!'

As it was the holiday, there were parents carrying their children along, high school students, and many couples.

The child sitting beside her was yelping away, and there was a couple seated in front. The woman said 'I heard that it's really touching~I brought 3 handkerchiefs~ If Yū cries too much, I'll wipe them off for you'.

Amidst the buzz, Asai leaned her back on the chair quietly.

(Why is it that couples get noisier the more unattractive they are?)

She grumbled, and awaited the commencement of the movie with a stoic attitude.

The movie finally began, and the opening scene was an abandoned dog trotting through the snowy ground. Sobbing could be heard everywhere.

The boy in front was bawling and shrilling, and the girl was hard at work, wiping his tears away.

Asai did not bat an eye at all.

(That's artificial snow, right? It's snowing unnaturally.)

She was picking at the background.

As the story progressed, there were sniveling echoing in the theater, sobbing to the point of choking and whimpering.

But Asai kept her cool persona as she continued to watch.

(The father's restaurant was going to close down the next day, and they had time to build a doghouse? They are talking about how dogs are important friends, but are they not filthy mongrels? They are not friends. The most important thing is that they have to think of how to revive the restaurant. This family will not have a future if they cannot do so.)

And so, an hour passed, and the riveting movie ended in the mix of emotions and praise.

As the credits rolled, the image of the harmonious family and dog appeared again. Some even bawled their hearts out, wiping each other's tears and snot off.

(This ending is made to be too popular with the common audience. 'I love you most in this world, my friend'. This old-fashioned line has been used in B-movies so many times.)

She watched with silent fury within her.

The most vexing aspect to her was the dog. Though it was reasonable that the dog died due to his injuries, the lamentations and anguish they showed was too exaggerated.

Asai wondered as she got ready to leave.

"What a coincidence, president."

Seated behind Asai was a smiling Hiina Oumi, her eyes completely red as she snivelled.

◇◇◇

"It really is unexpected of you to watch such movies, President Saiga. I feel that we're a lot closer now~"

Somehow, Saiga ended up heading to a curry shop with Hiina.

Hiina said that 'there's a great restaurant' as she continued to pester per usual. Asai was too lazy to refuse, and simply followed her.

"A movie about kinship is really great~ the doggie's really cute too. I ended up crying so hard when he died in the end though~"

"Miss Oumi, were you stalking me?"

"Nope~ Just a coincidence~"

"I do not like to beat around the bush. I have something later, so be snappy."

Asai spoke coldly, and Hiina, upon hearing this, showed a boyish expression,

"Is that so? I'll get straight to the point then. The reason why the police started investigations on Mr Kuze was because of you, right?"

Asai frowned slightly.

"In Kuze's Corporation, Mr Soichiro, acting as advisor, is in a power struggle with the chairman. If you informed the chairman's side of such news, surely one can expect matters to end up like this."

"Are you saying that I leaked the news?"

"Yeah~"

Asai continued to maintain her poker face as she coldly answered,

"I am a high school student. What benefit will I get if I interfere with a major enterprise's affairs?"

"President, didn't you abhor the notion of Mr Soichiro taking little Shiiko away?"

"..."

"You really raised your voice at Mr Akagi back then. It really isn't like what you would normally do."

"..."

"Shiiko is someone Lord Hikaru really reached out to help and nurture. As Her Highness Aoi had said, her circumstances were too similar to Lord Hikaru's. You felt it unbearable when you saw that Mr Akagi handed her over to Mr Soichiro, right?"

Hiina tilted her head, observing the response from Asai.

Asai remained stoic, but coldly stated out of disinterest,

"He was willing to kneel down in front of me even though he really despised me, and yet gave up that easily in the end. I did not want such a half-hearted man to be Hikaru's representative."

"It sounds like you have acknowledged Mr Akagi to be Lord Hikaru's representative. That's why you're angry, right?"

"How foolish."

Asai impatiently stated, and Hiina suddenly dropped a bombshell.

"President, why don't you just go out with Mr Akagi?"

For a moment, Asai was practically unable to comprehend what she said.

Dating? You want me to go dating with that wretched mongrel?

In an instant, Asai gave Hiina her most condescending look.

"Miss Oumi, I will advise you to head to the hospital to do a CT scan. Maybe there is a cerebral illness."

"Isn't it a classic storyline for two opposing people to fall in love with each other?"

"Humans cannot possibly fall in love with mongrels."

"Don't people fall in love with dogs at first sight?"

"He is not of a superior breed like those in the pet shop."

"Then what about a noisy alley on a rainy day?"

"I will never head to filthy places like bustling alleys, and surely I will never fall in love with them."

Asai said decisively.

"Are you done with what you had to say? I shall be leaving for I have business to

attend to."

After saying that, Asai slapped a 1000 Yen note onto the table before going off.

"President, your mutton curry hasn't arrived yet."

"You can have it."

"Eh? But I ordered spinach and eggplant curry and some tandoori chicken! I'll grow fat if I eat two people's share~! The Naan they sell here is really big~"

Hiina continued to squabble, but Asai ignored her.

(Right. Time to buy some tear-inducing books at the bookshop.)

She wanted to read these and build a firm will that would never cry in any situations.

For the sake of her childhood promise.

◊◊◊

(This is bad. I haven't asked her about some things.)

Hiina watched Asai leave the restaurant, and shrugged her shoulder slightly.

(For example, whether the power struggle on Kuze's side is like a certain megacorp, what she's trying to protect by plotting and building influences. Also, it does seem a coincidence that Lord Hikaru died at such a time…)

"Well, it's fine."

She could continue to pester Asai the next day, the day after and so on despite the latter's annoyance.

And it was delightful to talk to her.

Hiina really admired Asai.

Her sharp icy stare and long flowing black hair were really great. The rational yet adamant narrow long eyes, firm nose bridge, thin lips were all very pretty.

Hiina too was envious of Asai's eternally straightened back and slender figure.

Though Hiina's overly large breasts were assets when it came to information gathering, she had mixed feelings about them.

Certainly, she really liked Asai's appearance.

But she really loved the intense emotions and determination hidden within Asai.

(The president is like me)

Asai was definitely like her, definitely willing to risk everything, even their lives, for a certain 'special' person that remained in their hearts.

And if that 'special' person said that he was struggling with life, and begged others to kill him…

"I'll definitely do that."

She said with ecstasy on her face.

Her eyes were filled with happiness as she watched the movie pamphlet on the table.

(Movies about kinship are really great~)

And then, she opened her cellphone, summoned the photo of her most important kin, and blushed, saying something she would never say to his face.

"You're the one I really love most, Big Brother."

Author's Notes

Hello, this is Mizuki Nomura.

The third volume of this 'When Hikaru was on Earth…...' series is about the prominent loli of the Heian era, 'Waka Murasaki'. After re-reading the part when Hikaru Genji abducted the young Murasaki to his home in the 'Tale of Genju', I suddenly had the thought, 'eh? he actually did such a thing?' and my impression of him fell by a lot. But after they started living together, young Murasaki's clingness onto Hikaru Genji was too cute~ I can totally imagine her actions and expressions.

Shiiko here is based on young Murasaki, but there were some changes In the prelude at the end of 'Yugao', she was drawn by Miss Takeoka to be really cute the way she looks at the sparrows, so after reading this volume, you might have a different impression on her. When I first received the illustration, (...we're going to have meatball rice today!) I had this voice dubbed in my mind.

The plushie Shiiko would not let go of in this volume is a product I fell in love at first sight on a shopping website. I thought that 'the most traditional types will be teddy bears...' and so I randomly browsed through the catalogue, only to be attracted by an unknown being. After that, I went to the plushie section in the department store to check the actual thing. The Capybara plushie I saw on the internet is not very similar to a real one, but both of them are very cute and adorable.

Also, regarding Mr Kuze's love for Orchids, there was actually an exhibition at the botanic park right when I was almost done with the second draft. The timing was so coincidental it surprised me. I learned a lot of things at the exhibition, and I got a lot of references. Most of the people at the exhibition were in their advanced ages, but everyone chatted with me enthusiastically. Despite how old they may be, those who attended were in high spirits, really impressive.

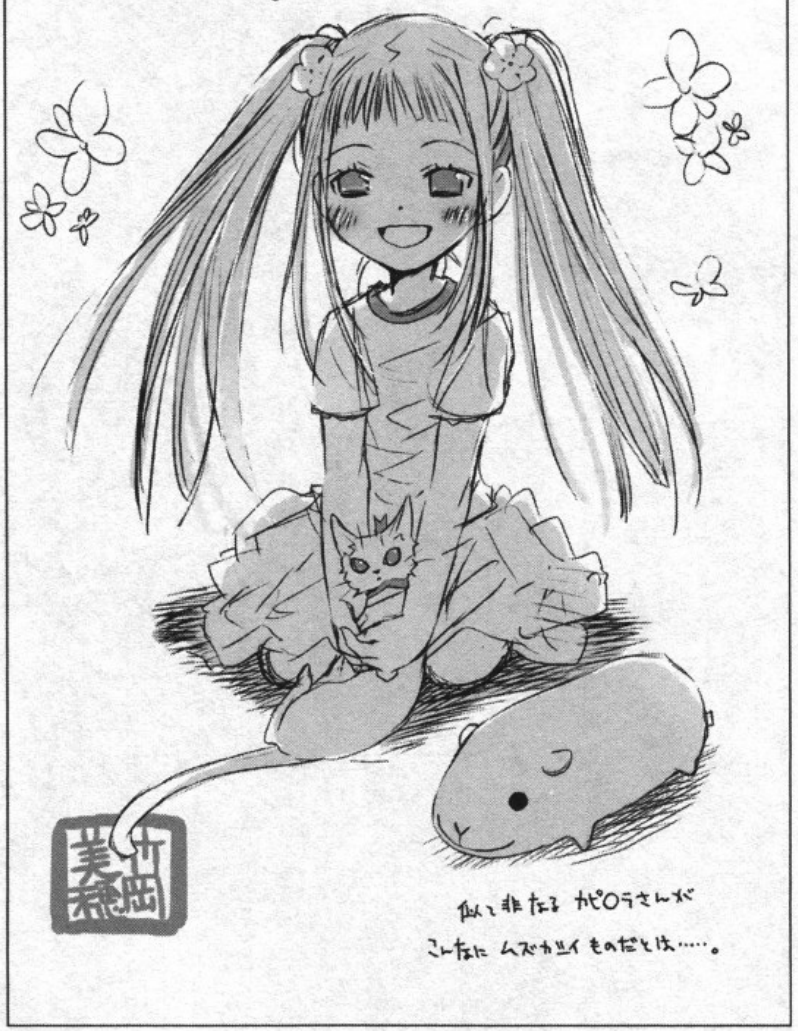
Hiina's dialect since the previous volume Yūgao was checked by Mr Yū Kogusa, and Mr Zabu of the editorial branch had been helping me answer certain difficult questions like 'how does the dialect of this area goes'. Thank you very much, both of you!

Now it's time for some announcements.

GANGAN Online will begin serialization of the manga version of 'When Hikaru Was On Earth…'! The illustrator this time is Mr CHuN, and the script is by Fua Yamasaki. CHuN's works are really great, and Teacher Yamasaki's skills at distilling the text is really amazing! Please read it and be amazed by their talents! It updates on Thursdays every month!

Also, the 'I'm a Royal Tutor in my Sister's Dress' series, published on the Fami official webpage will be released in book form on February 29, while the manga version will come out on March 1st! The illustrator Sakurai has drawn cute pages, and the story arrangement and pacing are really exciting, so please do buy them when you have time. I should not be saying such things, but the manga version looks more exciting than the LN version. Ah! do support the original work if you have the chance. This is a comedy concerning an ordinary younger brother taking the role of his genius older sister as a royal tutor in another country, and it is a work I really enjoy. I hope that I can continue to write about the passionate love between the younger brother and OOOO, so I will be really pleased if everyone can support by buying. I am currently writing the short stories from the perspective of the city people so that they will be used in the LNs themselves!

あと描き。



似て非なる カピ○ラさんが
こんなに ムズカシイ ものだとは……。

The 4th volume of this 'When Hikaru Was On Earth…..' series is about the brother's wife~!!! The prettiest flower amongst Hikaru's collection will debut! I shall stop here, and let us meet again in the next issue of 'When Hikaru Was On Earth...' at the end of Spring, or 'I'm a Royal Tutor in my Sister's Dress' in early Spring!

November 18th 2011,

Mizuki Nomura

References

Mitsuru Sakurai, 'Ten thousand flowers--the origin of floral living and culture' (1984). Japan, Yuzankaku Publishing. Printed on November 5th.

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